

Body & soul

Five years on from her Oscar-winning portrayal of Edith Piaf, Marion Cotillard continues to take on big challenges – including becoming a mother. Now, in the upcoming film *Rust and Bone*, she plays a double amputee who falls in love with a struggling single father

BY MATT MUELLER

Marion Cotillard has an intoxicating effect on people, not least her directors. Christopher Nolan wanted her so badly as Christian Bale's love interest in *The Dark Knight Rises* that he shuffled the blockbuster sequel's schedule to accommodate her pregnancy (she gave birth to her son Marcel, with French actor and director Guillaume Canet, in May 2011, at the start of the shoot). When Olivier Dahan was seeking an actress to portray Edith Piaf, he singled out Cotillard, who he didn't even know at the time, as the only actress with the requisite life-force to, as he put it, "embody Piaf while also capturing her soul". Of course, she went on to win an Oscar, a Golden Globe, a BAFTA and a César for her remarkable, immersive turn as "the little sparrow" in *La Vie en Rose*. And Jacques Audiard confesses that, as he was conceiving his unusual love story *Rust and Bone*, he decided that if he couldn't have Cotillard in the lead role, he wouldn't make it at all.

"In her personality and in her expression, she's a perfect mix of masculine and feminine," Audiard says. "I noticed it in *La Vie en Rose*. There were moments in the film where she was almost transcendent. I always hoped our paths would cross."

He's fortunate that they did: *Rust and Bone* may be one of the most evocative and passionate love stories of the year, but its melodramatic narrative can stretch credulity at times. In less-assured hands, this dark fairy tale could have gone awry. Moreover, if anyone other than Cotillard had played Stéphanie, a killer-whale trainer who loses her legs in an orca attack and overcomes her subsequent despair with the help of a sensitive street-fighting brute named Alain (Belgian actor Matthias Schoenaerts), the role could have wallowed in messy self-pity. But, while there's plenty of sobbing and vulnerability, Cotillard is an intensely grounding presence, allowing *Rust and Bone* to feel genuine rather than manipulative.

When I meet Cotillard, there's something haunting about her – a poignant fragility that can make her powerful to watch, with that trace of androgyny that Audiard observed. ▶

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"I take that as a compliment from Jacques," she says. "And I know that in my family, the feminine side and the masculine side are equal. That must reflect in me." Cotillard was thrilled at the prospect of working with Audiard, as she had been besotted by his previous films, *The Beat That My Heart Skipped* (2005) and *A Prophet* (2009) – but she was unsure of the role.

"With Piaf, I needed to know every little corner of her personality, every detail, every layer," Cotillard says. "With Stéphanie, I didn't know who she was at first. She was very mysterious, and I didn't get her right away. I had to go on a journey with Jacques to find her, which was what was so exciting and inspiring. And that mystery I felt about her stayed with me throughout the shoot."

Cotillard's immersion in the role was no less thorough than her time playing Piaf. Schoenaerts recalls the first day on set with his co-star, shooting a scene where Alain finds Stéphanie at a bar after her accident – a woman with a disability who now finds herself judged and/or ignored by the bar's rowdy patrons. When the actor arrived, he found Cotillard staring at the ground, not speaking to anyone, already locked into Stéphanie's sorrowful mind set. "She was

looking so small and insignificant," he recalls. "I think her intensity frightened me at first."

For her part, Cotillard is reluctant to reveal many details about what went into forging her demanding turn as a double amputee. The film is an extraordinary technical feat that was created with the use of an amputee body double as well as digital techniques.

"I don't find it very interesting to talk about the technical aspects of the role," she demurs. "The reason why I'm doing this job is to show how this person is going to improve her desire to live after she has a dramatic accident. I think it's beautiful to show how someone can be more complete without a part of herself than she was when she had her whole body."

Both *The Dark Knight Rises* and *Rust and Bone* were shot after her pregnancy, and she agrees that becoming a mother has brought about a shift in tangible and intangible ways. "It's definitely changed me, although I don't know if it affected the way I work," she says. "On set it was the same, because when I'm in the character, then it's only the character. But usually when I work, off set I create an environment – because most of the time I'm in a new apartment or a new house or in a hotel room. I create this special environment that I need, because someone is sharing my body and is there most of the time with me. But now, with my son, it's impossible to take someone else home."

"I managed to do it," she says. "And it felt natural, because there's this human being that I love more than anything, and he needs me. So it was kind of organic to step away from the character and come back the next day." Cotillard and Canet, who have been together since 2007, live a simple life by all accounts, and certainly by international celebrity standards. They're regularly seen out together in Paris, shopping or hanging out together in cafés. The actress admits to fleeting thoughts of becoming a full-time mother, although she says she realised, "I definitely could live without acting; I just wouldn't be very happy."

When it comes to career choices, Cotillard relies on her own counsel and intuition when singling out the roles she wants to play from the pile of scripts sent her way. "They're all for myself," she says. "If I ever need advice, I will ask the people I love and trust. But usually I create my own little world and deal with it." *Rust and Bone* may well yield another avalanche of awards for the actress; her performance has received rave reviews as the film travelled the global film festival circuit.

Audiard instructed Cotillard to play Stéphanie "like a cowboy", and she is a nomadic, taciturn, somewhat confused spirit before her accident – but after it, she comes to discover a strength she didn't know she possessed. We're used to seeing her convey toughness on the big screen. Is that how she feels in life, too?

"Tough? I don't know," she says. "But I definitely have strength. There are very few things that could put me down. In fact, I can't think of a single one." ■

Rust and Bone opens on 2nd November in the UK

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

FILM STILLS As Stéphanie in *Rust and Bone* and with co-star Matthias Schoenaerts as Alain