

MUSIC

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BOOKS

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Her true colours

Bérénice Bejo is leaving behind the black and white world of *The Artist* for a complex contemporary role

THE SUNDAY TIMES

CULTURE

When *The Artist* became 2011's *incroyable* success story, its lead actress, Bérénice Bejo, saw her husband — the film's director, Michel Hazanavicius — and co-star, Jean Dujardin, add gold statuettes to their hoards. Even a scrappy white dog named Uggie basked in the avalanche of adoration trained at this black-and-white silent movie. The charming Bejo had to settle for being feted on a lot of red carpets. But they led somewhere unexpected.

On the awards-campaign circuit, she crossed paths with somebody else on the brink of a big breakthrough, the exacting Iranian film-maker Asghar Farhadi, whose *A Separation* was to be the year's best international film at most ceremonies. Befriending him led Bejo to a role that couldn't be further away from the captivating Peppy Miller in *The Artist*, and the meatiest of her career so far.

"I thought that if all Asghar's movies were so good, and all the actors were so good in them, I should be as good as the others," she says with a smile. If only Hollywood actresses were half as honest about their real reasons for wanting to work with a director. So "obsessed" was Bejo by the prospect of collaborating with Farhadi, she freely admits the script and character barely registered at first.

The *Past* tells the wrenchingly intimate tale of Marie, a French woman whose gentle estranged husband, Ahmad (Ali Mossafa), returns from Iran to finalise their divorce and moves in with her, their two children (by other partners) and her new, younger lover, Samir (Tahar Rahim, star of *A Prophet*). It's Bejo's opportunity to position herself as a leading dramatic actress able to deliver a performance of heft and substance.

In June 2012, she was on the verge of leaving Paris for a three-month vacation with Hazanavicius and their children, Lucien and Gloria (yes, named after the silent screen star Gloria Swanson), when her agent phoned to say Farhadi wanted to meet up immediately. The director didn't tell Bejo anything about his film; he simply conducted hair and make-up tests, took a few snaps. The meeting lasted less than an hour.

Then Bejo jetted off to Argentina while Farhadi continued testing other actresses.

After a month of anxious waiting, she fielded a call from her agent, informing her she was the only one being sent Farhadi's script. When they met in Paris a week later, she recalls: "We were sitting and talking, and he starts saying things like, 'When we will be on set...' I'm like, 'Wait a second. Do I have the role?' He said, 'Of course you have the role.' That's Asghar. He's always manipulating people a bit."

If the role of Marie sounds more suited to a Binoche, Cotillard or even Gainsbourg, Farhadi was as smitten as the rest of us by Peppy Miller, recognising the intense, intelligent preparation Bejo had devoted to paying homage to those early

family's stifling bubble and the traumatic secrets it contains, before detonating bombshells. It's why Farhadi is so fastidious with performances, toying with his actors until he gets what he wants. Rahim and Mosaffa were required to act with cotton-wool balls stuffed in their mouths; Bejo nearly suffered the same fate before Farhadi changed his mind. "It's an annoyance, like having Asghar in their mouth," she says.

She had her own Farhadi-isms to cope with, and doubted herself as she fought to connect with the depressive, low-energy Marie. Her stress and sensitivities weren't entirely misplaced. "I remember Asghar saying, 'You look too happy, you look too rested. Don't go to bed!' And I was laughing all the time with the crew, so at one point he said to them, 'Stop talking with Bérénice!'"

For a crucial, devastating sequence in which Marie throws her troubled teenage daughter Lucie (Pauline Buriel) out of the house, Farhadi spent a day shooting the other actors' performances, while Bejo delivered her lines at full emotional tilt for their benefit. The next day, Bejo was ready for her own close-up, only for Farhadi to say, after two quick takes, that he had what he needed. The actress burst into tears, an outburst that spread like wildfire among the crew and other actors, forcing Farhadi, on the verge of tears himself, to allow her another take — "I was terrible, of course" — before showing her on the monitor how good she'd been in the previous two.

It's Farhadi's "strength", Bejo says, to make his actors sick of a scene until eventually he's able to capture less obvious moments of truth. Yet moments like these make Marie difficult to warm to. When I ask Bejo if she was concerned that her role might come across as too hard or selfish, she insists it never crossed her mind on set, but she can see it in retrospect. "When I watch the movie, I feel a lot of pity and sadness for Marie," she says. "She's not mean, she's just stuck in a situation that is not happy. As you can hear, I'm quite happy with my little people, my two kids..."

We are talking over the phone at this point. Our first conversation took place in Cannes last May, when Bejo radiated gamine glamour in a snow-white sundress. Now she's in her Paris apartment, juggling our conversation with two

I was laughing with the crew, so the director said, 'Stop talking to Bérénice!'

screen queens — long hours spent at the Cinémathèque Française with her husband, soaking up the silent movies of Swanson and Janet Gaynor. She then committed herself to a six-month shoot for *The Past*, including two months of rehearsal — a leisurely pace Farhadi commands for all his features, no matter what the story.

The *Past* is set mostly in a single location, the Brisson family home in a rundown Paris *banlieue*. It took time for Bejo to adjust to the film-maker's painstaking methodology. "We could have shot this movie in six weeks, faster and differently. But Asghar makes everything more complicated than it is," she says. "At the beginning, we were all kind of bored. But once we got used to his rhythm, we were quite happy. Now I see it only as an amazing experience."

Farhadi's camera acts like an unwanted intruder, lurking in places that don't always reveal the immediate truth, but encase you in the

Bérénice Bejo talks to Matt Mueller

HER BLUE PERIOD

After international acclaim in *The Artist*, the French star's next big role is a real change in tone. Playing a sullen woman caught in a *ménage à trois*, she proves herself an actress of dramatic substance

Photograph by Francois Berthier/
Contour by Getty Images



INTERVIEW | Bérénice Bejo

» attention-seeking under-fives. "I feel far away from this kind of life."

She frequently disagreed with her character's behaviour, but ascribes that partly to cultural divergences; Marie's actions are definitely more judgment-laden than those of Samir or Ahmad. "I remember Asghar saying, 'She's having so much fun with Ahmad. Don't you think she's being unfaithful with Samir?'" I said, 'Asghar, I truly disagree. You can laugh and have fun — it doesn't mean you're being unfaithful.'

Bejo received a magnificent career boost in France through *The Artist*; then Marie won her the best actress prize at Cannes. Prior to Farhadi's epic shoot, she filmed a supporting role in the bubbly romcom *Populaire* and a leading one in *The Scapegoat*, the first book in a popular French children's series. She also dubbed the role of Merida for the French release of Pixar's *Brave*, and was awarded the Prix Romy Schneider in 2012, an industry gong for promising actresses — although, when I point out that being named an up-and-comer when you're 36 (Bejo turns 38 this summer) seems eccentric, she agrees. "That is so French. They still don't get what 'up-and-coming' means."

Bejo is able to bring a wry outsider's perspective to the country she calls home. Her Argentine parents fled their country's dictatorship-led Dirty War in 1979, arriving in Paris when Bejo was three. She worked for 15 years in French film and television, and even had a brief early dalliance with Hollywood when, during an LA holiday, she auditioned for the writer-director Brian Koppelman's 2001 film *A Knight's Tale*. Koppelman wanted to cast her as his female lead, opposite Heath Ledger, but the studio vetoed the plan and she was demoted to handmaiden. "It was cute, but that was the end of my American experience," she says. She met Hazanavicius five years later, when he cast her in his 2006 spy-film parody *OSS 117: Cairo, Nest of Spies*.

In practical terms, she maintains that *The Artist*'s success hasn't changed their life. They get recognised a lot, although her initial unprepared response — to be "a bit aggressive" — has segued into smiling acceptance. "If I smile and say hello, they pass by." She still rambles around Paris on the Métro or on her bicycle. And Hazanavicius's Oscar is no longer on display, "because *The Artist* has to be in the past".

Bejo bluntly reveals how many Hollywood approaches she's received since that giddy time: "Zero." Seriously? You'd have thought the door to Aladdin's cave would have swung off its hinges. Dujardin seems to be doing all right, but roles in the US for actresses between the ages of 35 and 45 are thin on the ground. She laughs, not overly worried by the lack of American interest. "If Ang Lee would call me, I would



Help from her friends
Bejo and Tahir Rahimi in
The Past, below, with
Uggie in *The Artist*



In practical terms, she maintains that *The Artist* hasn't changed her life

go right away. But I'm slow. Everything in my [life] has gone slow. Maybe one day it will happen."

She describes her A-list status at home as "ephemeral... I can feel the energy around me is different, but I'm not thinking, 'I'm there now, I'm cool.'" And she laughs again when I suggest that she and Hazanavicius are at the beating heart of the French film establishment, like Mendes and Winslet when they still shared their lives and digs. Even after 34 years in her adopted country, Bejo can still feel like an outsider. Much seems to be riding on *The Search*, her husband's new film, a version of Fred Zinneman's 1948 wartime drama updated from postwar Berlin to Russia's invasion of Chechnya. They are hoping it will be accepted at Cannes, though audiences expecting *The Artist 2* are in for a shock.

"It's a difficult story," says Bejo, who portrays a UN worker coming to the aid of a traumatised boy in the war-ravaged republic. "It's very realistic, there's no music." Hazanavicius planned to direct this drama before *The Artist*. The autumn shoot



in Georgia was, admits Bejo, an arduous experience with a potentially unhappy outcome, driven by the fact that, beside herself and Annette Bening, the cast was entirely nonprofessional, and few spoke English. Hundreds of extras unschooled in the ways of moviemaking would freeze in their shoes whenever Hazanavicius shouted action. "Every day, Michel was like, 'I'm going to give up, this movie's too hard,'" she sighs. "At the end of the shoot, he was depressed — he didn't know what he had."

Then, in the editing suite, Hazanavicius's spirits picked up, and Bejo says they're proud of the final result, even if the pressure of following *The Artist* hovered like an angry spectre. "It's those things you don't say, but they're there — 'If I have an Oscar, it's because I am good', and 'This film has to be good because I've got an Oscar'. Michel knows it is going to be watched closely by

everyone. In the end, he got the movie he wants. But that doesn't mean it's gonna work, or critics are going to like it."

When Harvey Weinstein orchestrated *The Artist*'s Oscar crusade, he convinced Bejo to vie for supporting actress, rather than lead. It's another inevitability she's ready for: "I go for supporting actress at the Oscars, and Annette goes for leading. And every time I see Harvey," she concludes with a laugh, "I will look at him, and he will see in my eyes that I'm really not happy." □

The Past opens on Mar 28

ST DIGITAL

Take a first look at *The Past*, starring Bérénice Bejo

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