

A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

Nicole Kidman and director Olivier Dahan on portraying an icon and going behind the fairytale in **Grace Of Monaco**

WORDS BY MATT MUELLER

In *Grace of Monaco*, Nicole Kidman stars as Grace Kelly, the Hollywood star who became a real-life princess following her 1956 marriage to Prince Rainier of Monaco. Decades before Diana and Kate Middleton, theirs was a fairy-tale marriage that enchanted and intrigued the world, not least because Kelly was at the peak of her Hollywood career when she chose to turn her back on movie acting and hurl

herself into the alien world of dynastic European aristocracy. But as everyone knows, life is rarely a fairytale, and such was the case with Grace in Monaco. "I didn't want to make a fairytale," confesses *Grace of Monaco's* French director Olivier Dahan. "I wanted to get to the flesh and bone of Grace's story."

Dahan picks up Grace's story in 1962, six years into her reign as Her

Serene Highness Princess Grace, and follows it over the course of six months. In that period, Rainier (played by Tim Roth) is faced with a political crisis as Charles de Gaulle's France rattles sabres over its tiny neighbour's position as a tax haven – belligerent posturing that threatens Monaco's independence – while Grace, raising two children but viewed with distrust by the Monégasque people and not sure who to trust

inside her own palace, longs for a return to acting after Alfred Hitchcock offers her the lead in his 1962 psychodrama *Marnie*.

Dahan and screenwriter Arash Amel present this time as a crossroads in Grace Kelly's life, when she contemplated sacrificing her position as the public's fairy-tale princess. Although Dahan views *Grace of Monaco* as "a complete contrast" to his 2007 Édith Piaf biopic *La Vie en Rose*, which won Marion Cotillard a Best Actress Oscar, he also considers them companion pieces in that both are intimate explorations of female artists: Piaf, the singer who couldn't stop; Kelly, the movie actress who chose (or was encouraged) to quit at the peak of her powers.

"I'm not interested in biopics," Dahan tells *Film3Sixty*. "I have to relate myself to the core of what I'm saying in the movie, and with *Grace of Monaco*, I wanted to talk about couples, about intimacy and about what it means to be an artist who decides to quit. I'm interested in Grace's story because she used

to be an actress, not because she was a princess."

Before casting her, Dahan initially chatted to Kidman over Skype before they met in LA. Straight away, he was impressed by the Australian star's commitment to playing Grace, and drawn by the parallels in her own life. "She's very close to the real character," he argues. "I'm not speaking about physically. It was more from the inside. Maybe she's been living a similar kind of existence at one point in her life. I think that's why she was so committed. She went through a lot of the same stuff."

Dahan doesn't need to spell out that being wedded to a hugely famous man for 10 years, as



Grace Kelly with Prince Rainier

Kidman was with Tom Cruise, gave her some understanding of living in a gilded cage, and he credits Kidman for drawing upon her empathic intuition to find the Grace she portrays on screen. "I have nothing but wonderful things to say about her," he says. "She's a wonderful actress." Kidman returns the compliment, crediting Dahan with "very gently" coaxing out her performance. Nor does she disagree with his assessment. "I can relate to existing in a famous marriage and still having the desire to work and be normal," muses Kidman, who immersed herself in research and worked intensely at perfecting Kelly's precise, cultured diction. "Grace really wanted that, I think. She wanted a home life with her children. She wanted a real marriage and the depths of a relationship. This film is where we eventually see that develop for her."

While pulling back the curtain to reveal the sacrifices Kelly was forced to make, the film is also ravishing to look at, steeped in the accoutrements of a royal life, from fantastic costumes to gorgeous

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Q&A

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On resembling Grace, Tim Roth and ivory towers.

What about this story appealed to you at its core?

Grace's desire for home and a family and her leaving the most extraordinary life that she'd worked toward. Our film starts where she has two children, she's married and she's in an ivory tower in a way, but she still has the desire to act. I thought, "I would know how to play that."

They've given you a strong resemblance to Grace.

[Laughs] Through the work of great hair and make-up people! That's how I morphed into Virginia Woolf [in *The Hours*] and so many other characters I've played. Grace Kelly was a classic beauty. If the hair and make-up artists have succeeded in making me look like Grace, then I am deeply flattered.

How was it working with Tim Roth? He's unusual casting as Prince Rainier.

He's playing an aristocrat, which is not what he's known for. Tim is a real actor so the depth you get from him is brilliant. So much of acting is that you're only as good as the people you work with.

What challenges are there in portraying such an iconic figure?

Of course I never met her so a lot of the character I developed had to be put together like a puzzle. Ultimately, there's artistic license but what I hope is that there's something that comes through that feels authentic and true. I would hope that Grace would not be disappointed if she watched it.

Grace Of Monaco is released in UK cinemas on 6 June.

