

Out of the blue

She captivated critics and audiences alike as Neytiri, a blue, nine-foot-tall alien in 2009's *Avatar*. Now Zoe Saldana is back in human form for her upcoming film *Colombiana*

BY MATT MUELLER

"Oh my god, it's *muy caliente*, right?" Making her entrance into a sea-facing suite at the Hotel Martinez in Cannes during the annual film festival, Zoe Saldana could easily be referring to her film career. In fact, she's commenting on the muggy room temperature and, although attired for south-of-France heat in a light summer dress, Saldana marches over to open a window and let the Mediterranean breeze blow in.

As the Pandoran warrior-princess Neytiri in James Cameron's *Avatar*, she was fervent, bright-eyed, defiant – and sexy, as nine-feet-tall, blue-toned aliens go. As deep-space xenolinguist Uhura in J.J. Abrams' *Star Trek*, she brought smouldering, sultry elegance to the perilous cosmos. In the space of two franchise behemoths, Saldana morphed from a maybe-star into a full-on Hollywood supernova. Not too shabby for an actress who might have survived the Britney Spears vehicle *Crossroads* and impressed Steven Spielberg and producer Jerry Bruckheimer, yet struggled to find her way in an industry that often sends black and Latina actors down typecasting plugholes – she herself being half Dominican and half Puerto Rican. Aware that complaining wasn't going to help her cause, she's kept a dignified silence about her worst encounters, while acknowledging the challenges she's faced.

"Sixty years ago, in the years of Ricardo Montalban and Rita Hayworth, they had to do what they had to do," she observes. "But now Latinos are becoming more integrated in society, and art has been evolving along with it. Those stereotypical roles are always going to be

there, but I will never be a part of them, or of anything that I feel is misrepresenting us, or only enhancing one aspect of our culture."

Prior to landing *Avatar*, Saldana admits she was getting sick of portraying women "who just cried all the time, or were emotionally compromised". Wanting to use the vigorous physicality that years of serious dance training gave her, she's now in the throes of a kick-ass phase, following *Avatar* and *Star Trek* with her highest-profile action heroine role yet in this month's *Colombiana*. Sprung from the same adrenalised hit factory that yielded the Liam Neeson thriller *Taken* – and following much the same revenge formula – the film features Saldana as Cataleya, a girl whose parents are murdered before her eyes by a drug cartel and who grows up to become an assassin with the express purpose of doling out payback.

To be able to play a character where you get to do what men are predominantly known to do is awesome," she grins. The intensive training that goes into starring in an action thriller like *Colombiana*, and the close-quarters baddie-bashing required of Saldana on set, however, does take its toll. And the 33-year-old actress says she is feeling it more and more these days. "My mom tells me I look like a map when I come home, because I'm black and blue all over the place," she says. "I'm addicted to the adrenalin of being physical, but I'm finally entering the consciousness of mortality. With *Avatar*, I was fine. I would get hurt, get up, brush it off and just keep going. But my body feels like it's aged 10 years since then. It can't reboot itself as quickly." ▶



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Saldana as Neytiri in *Avatar*; RIGHT, FROM TOP As Cataleya in *Colombiana*; and on the set of *Star Trek* with director J.J. Abrams



“We’re tough, we’re feisty, we work too much and we don’t take breaks”

Colombiana also sees Saldana displaying an impressive facility for using hand artillery. She discloses where her degree of comfort comes from: “Latinos hunt! My dad and his brothers were countrymen from the Dominican Republic, so I grew up with a rifle around,” she says, adding with a laugh, “Now that I’m an adult and I know what weapons represent, I would have wanted my father to have used a little more caution, keeping weapons away from us. But my stepfather’s also a hunter, and my partner in life comes from a family of hunters, so I’m comfortable having guns around.”

Although she regularly hits the firing range with her partner, actor-businessman Keith Britton, Saldana doesn’t hunt and insists she’s never taken a life herself – “except maybe an ant here and there”. But she has no qualms about her friends and family taking part, differentiating them from “people who, just because they have money or want a rug in their living room, will go to Africa and kill an animal that’s at the point of extinction. There’s no dignity in that, there’s nothing to respect about that. My partner and his family will eat and use everything of an animal they’ve killed. And I take pleasure in that, because I can have venison stroganoff and really enjoy it.”

As for Britton, Saldana has been with him for 10 years, and they got engaged last summer. Saldana calls him “the right man to be growing old with, because he holds his own. We were very young when we got together, and we’re very respectful of each other’s lives and cultures. I exercise my right to be who I am, and to think the way that I do.”

Next year, Saldana is due to return to Pandora, the fictional planet that’s made her famous, for back-to-back shoots on the *Avatar* sequels. Despite its success, you’d imagine that Saldana’s reaction at the prospect of taking herself off the market for nearly 18 months during what is arguably the peak of her career might be a starry strop. But she expresses the complete opposite. “Are you kidding?” she squeals. “Do you know what it means? It means that I’ll be employed for over a year in a business that’s unpredictable!”

Such pragmatism is a sign both of her New York

work ethic – “we’re tough, we’re feisty, we work too much and we don’t take breaks” – and being raised to seize responsibility for her own life.

Saldana grew up in Queens until her “hippie” Puerto Rican mother moved the family to the Dominican Republic at age 10, after Zoe’s father died. It was there that she discovered dance, studying ballet and other forms at one of the country’s most prestigious academies. When she headed back to New York at 17, Saldana segued into acting by joining a youth theatre group that put on positive-message plays for teens coping with substance abuse and sexual issues. Soon, she found herself recruited by a talent agency and, at the age of 21, landed her debut film role as a bolshevik diva in *Center Stage* (directed by the National Theatre’s own Nicholas Hytner).

In preparation for *Avatars 2* and *3* and her reprisal of Uhura in the *Star Trek* sequel this autumn (she hopes she gets more to do this time around), Saldana opted to take the first half of 2011 off. “My body needed it, and so did my brain. I needed to decompress.” And she couldn’t be more delighted at the personal freedom that’s come with stepping off the gruelling Hollywood treadmill. “I eat what I want, I’ve stopped exercising, and I have a life – as opposed to just waking up and running around, hopping on a plane, doing this, doing that, exercising, going to bed early,” she says. “I’ve been spending a lot of time with family, travelling and having fun – and staying out really late.”

She beams with pleasure. “I love love love going out! There’s nothing better than dressing up, putting on make-up and heels and going dancing. I love it, and why not? I’m human and I’m young – and I’ll be telling you the same thing when I’m 70 years old.”

***Colombiana* opens on 9th September in the UK**

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