



# ACTING UP

Twenty years after making the giant leap from Spanish underground star to Hollywood heartthrob, Antonio Banderas is still calling the shots

BY MATT MUELLER

Antonio Banderas enters a stark conference room at the third Doha Tribeca Film Festival. Outside, it's a blazing hot day in Qatar's capital city, a metropolis rising out of the sand like some ephemeral mirage. Inside, the temperature is so frigidly climate-controlled, a chunky wool jumper would not be unwelcome. Banderas is casually attired in blue jeans, a light blue denim shirt and cowboy boots, his salt-and-pepper hair cropped short and a Celtic cross, a silver star and a small gold locket dangling from the chain around his neck.

Like in his most memorable roles – Zorro in *The Mask of Zorro*, Che Guevara in *Evita* and El Mariachi in *Desperado* – he is a dashing, charismatic presence. And this is him on two hours' sleep. Though Banderas, who arrived in Qatar the night before to support his desert epic *Black Gold* and the Shrek spin-off *Puss in Boots*, may be suffering from vicious jet lag, he says, "I'm still alive, which is enough for the time being." A schedule glitch prevented him from arriving in time for *Black Gold's* opening-night premiere, but he's made the effort to come down for the remainder of the festival.

He's in an expansive mood, talking eloquently and honestly

about his life and a career that's been going strong since the early 1980s. Born in Málaga to a schoolteacher mother and police officer father, Banderas wanted to be a professional footballer but broke his left foot two days before Franco died – which was fortuitous, as he abandoned sports in favour of the performing arts right when the country began shaking off decades of artistic repression. While performing at Spain's National Theatre, in Madrid, he was introduced to a young man who told him, "You've got a romantic face – you should do movies." I asked my friends, "Who was that guy?" They said, "His name is Pedro Almodóvar. He did one movie, but he'll never do another one," Banderas laughs. "The world is filled with prophets."

Instead, the flamboyant Spanish filmmaker ended up launching Banderas' career in a series of taboo-busting projects like *Law of Desire*, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* Banderas was 31 when Hollywood beckoned – but he didn't speak a word of English, so he had to learn his dialogue in 1992's *The Mambo Kings* phonetically. At the time, Banderas figured working in America was something he could tell his kids about. But directors and producers spotted star potential in Banderas, and kept calling him back for more. The real turning point,



though, he admits, came when he met Melanie Griffith on the set of the 1995 romantic comedy *Two Much*.

"I met my wife, then I married her, and she came with two kids," he reflects. "I didn't have any kids from my first marriage, so I was the one who was going to move, obviously. Going to live in Los Angeles completely changed my life. If that hadn't happened, I believe I'd still be living in Spain."

Banderas' union with Griffiths continues to defy the laws of Hollywood gravity. This spring, they will celebrate 16 years of marriage, and the couple has a 15-year-old daughter, Stella (as well as Griffiths' two children from previous marriages, Alexander and Dakota).

Hollywood has allowed Banderas to dabble in genres ranging from horror to action-adventure to musicals to children's films. But the American industry has often struggled to know what to do with him, with projects like the *Spy Kids* trilogy not maximising the Spanish actor's talents.

His best Hollywood role came in 1998, with *The Mask of Zorro*, a film he takes great pride in. "When I first went to America, I was told, 'You're going to play a lot of bad guys; you're going to play narcotics dealers and delinquents,'" he

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Banderas with Anthony Hopkins in 1998's *The Mask of Zorro*; with Madonna in 1996's *Evita*; with actress Melanie Griffith, to whom he has been married for 15 years; and as Emir Nesib in the upcoming *Black Gold*



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says. "So it was important for me to play a hero like Zorro, who had a thick accent and looked Spanish." Banderas also has the animated *Shrek* franchise to thank for providing him with a voice character that has become one of his most iconic roles. "It's a paradox in my life," he smiles, "considering that I arrived in the country not able to speak English."

His latest film, *Black Gold*, is about the discovery of oil in the Arabian peninsula in the 1930s, and how it rekindles a bitter war between two rival chieftains, Nesib (Banderas) and Amar (British actor Mark Strong) and tests the loyalties of Amar's son, Prince Auda (Tahar Rahim) who was raised by Nesib as a way of guaranteeing the peace. For a star trying to take his career in new directions, the part rolled along at the perfect time, and he is very watchable as *Black Gold's* more corruptible emir.

"I'm pretty sure that I have Arab blood," says Banderas, who has been developing a project about Spain's last Islamic caliph for years. "I'm Andalucian, from the south of Spain, and my mother is from a Morisco village – Moriscos were Muslims who stayed in Spain but converted to Christianity. *Black Gold* has to do with Arabs, but it also has to do with money and how it can corrupt. It makes sense to be talking about that nowadays. We are living in a time in which money has taken over everything."

Besides shooting *Black Gold* in Tunisia right when the Arab Spring was taking off, last year was significant for Banderas (or "magic", as he put it) in that it marked his long-awaited reunion with Almodóvar. In the suitably twisted medical thriller *The Skin I Live In*, the director gave his former protégé his best role in years as a doctor who exacts a cruel revenge for his wife's death. "It was a hard film to shoot, but I loved the result, and it made me reflect a lot about myself as an actor. I had to wait 21 years until Pedro came back to my life, and he has shaken me up. Now I'd like to stop, think, and start using the most important word in Hollywood: no. I'm 51. I no longer need to rush into anything. Things will come to me when they're ready."

One area Banderas would like to re-explore is the stage. Theatre, he insists, is still his first and strongest love. "It's like a woman I loved very much but mistreated," he says. His last stage role came in the award-winning 2003 Broadway revival of the musical *Nine*, and he has recently been plotting a return to the Great White Way with another musical revival, this time of Kander and Ebb's *Zorba*. Whether he ends up playing the title role or another character, Banderas is convinced that his best is yet to come. "I still think that I haven't done that one thing that I know I will feel very proud of," he says. "I have that feeling with me all the time." ■

***Black Gold* opens on 20th January in the UK**

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