

ART HOUSE,

MOI?

We'd expect the new album and the jubilee concert. What's surprising is that Kylie Minogue is in the weirdest French film for years. Even she was amazed, she tells Matt Mueller

If the organisers of this year's Cannes Film Festival had decided to stage an impromptu concert drawing together the musical VIPs who turned up on cinema's hallowed turf to plug their films, what a strange gig that would have made: Pete Doherty, Ronan Keating, Kanye West... and Kylie Minogue, who trumped them all, cinematically speaking, by co-starring in the craziest competition entry, a film so fever-dream-demented that its director, Leos Carax, seemed perplexed (or not fussed) when it came to shedding light on its themes.

As his noncommittal responses at the official press conference were all he said publicly during the festival, people who saw *Holy Motors* have been coming up with their own interpretations of what on earth it's about. The general consensus? That this berserk tale of an actor (his regular collaborator Denis Lavant) being ferried around Paris in a white stretch limo that talks is a love letter to cinema, written in hallucinatory but poetic hieroglyphs. Each of the guises Lavant appears in, from gypsy beggar to fairytale troll, represents a film genre — file Minogue's appearance under "musicals".

She features in the most poignant sequence, as she and Lavant circle each other in an empty department store while chewing over a tragedy from their past that still haunts them both. Words aren't enough, however, so Minogue, in a trench coat and short blonde wig, also belts out a tender ballad. "It's such a human moment that we can relate to about past love, past experience, tragedy. It was moving to perform, and the song helps tell the story so well," says Minogue, a Francophile who can't quite believe she's in Cannes, championing her role in a cult filmmaker's cause célèbre.

She should be so lucky. "I'll be 44 in a few days — I'm doomed!" she chirruped at one point, but in truth her blend of good fortune, fortitude and an audience-



Spinning around: Kylie, star of Leos Carax's *Holy Motors*. **Left, Denis Lavant snatches a quick bite in the film**

friendly disposition have kept her at the top of the pop-culture heap for decades. First she was the golden girl of teatime soaps, then the eternal pop sprite (68m records sold, and counting). Even her high-profile battle with breast cancer comes with a positive spin: mammograms rocketed by 40% in Australia as a result of the publicity.

She's the picture of rude health when she makes a perky entrance onto a sun-dappled terrace in the gardens of a residential apartment complex. For one thing, she looks as if she's hardly aged in 25 years ("I've changed enough— things are sagging"), although her famous diminutiveness is not exaggerated. Kylie's bio pegs her generously at 5ft 1¾in, but she's probably scraping 5ft 4¾in thanks to a precarious pair of strappy heels. Platforms aside, she is unexpectedly unadorned for a global phenomenon swanning around the planet's most glamorous backdrop: blue capri slacks, a black crocheted top, no jewellery and unfussy make-up. She must be saving it for later, when she'll turn up on the red carpet in a blinding gold-sequins gown and supplementary bling.

So how on God's green earth did Australia's sprightliest pop star and France's most reclusive film-maker — a director so scarred by his experiences on his 1991 film with Lavant and Juliette Binoche, *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf*, he has completed only two full-length features since (1999's *Pola X* and *Holy Motors*) — ever come to cross paths, let alone make the decision to collaborate? It was a mutual friend, the director Claire Denis, who suggested to Carax that he should meet Minogue, to talk about a project that didn't pan out. Instead, he diverted the singer-actress (who lived in France for a while, and once dated the French actor Olivier Martinez) into *Holy Motors*. "It was a beautiful curveball," Minogue says in an Aussie twang softened by years spent away from her home country. "It was unexpected, and it was timely. Otherwise, the treadmill just keeps going — album-tour, album-tour, album-tour... This was just *sooo* different."

That's an understatement. Minogue admits she was baffled by the script on a first reading, and unsure which role he wanted her for (although we can safely

assume she knew it wasn't the sex-fiend contortionist who crops up in the most bizarre segment). Carax had scant knowledge of Kylie's hit-factory past, beyond her 1995 duet with Nick Cave, *Where the Wild Roses Grow*, but he proved a quick learner: in one of the film's laugh-out-loud moments, Lavant collects his "daughter" from a party as *Can't Get You Out of My Head* blares out of the open window.

Minogue says she "gave myself over completely to Leos" and, relieved to take a break from the business of "being 'Kylie'", banned her vast entourage from the set. "It was almost uninventing myself," she muses. On the same score, she has squeezed in a cameo in the upcoming film *Jack and Diane*, a horror-romance about lesbian werewolves in New York. "I reinvent myself all the time for my usual job. This was about getting rid of all that stuff." Presumably, though, she could have chosen to return to the big screen in something splashier or more mainstream. Why didn't she? "Because the other films I've done were just disastrous," she counters, not cracking a smile — and not getting any argument back.



Kylie's own flesh and blood would have difficulty defending the detritus on her CV, much of it an insult to bargain bins everywhere. You might make a case for her post-Neighbours showcase *The Delinquents*, but *Street Fighter*, one of the more abysmal Jean-Claude Van Damme vehicles, and the Razzie-winning Pauly Shore comedy *Bio-Dome* are unpardonable. When her absinthefairy in *Moulin Rouge* is the only bright spot in the 13-year span following *Neighbours*, you can't blame her for sticking to the task of manufacturing candy-floss dance hits and sexually provocative videos. Bar guest spots on the television series *Kath & Kim* and *Doctor Who*, Minogue avoided acting for more than a decade until Carax called.

"Holy Motors was a way for me to test the waters, and now I feel like, 'Okay, this is great.' Because I feel at home on a film or a TV set. That's where I started and, though I can't remember too much about being 11 and making *The Sullivans* — where the sets wobble and it's not anything marvellous — it's part of my psyche."

The two strongest memories Minogue has of her pre-stardom days are finding out she'd nabbed the role of Charlene in *Neighbours* just when she was about to collect her first dole cheque, and "getting into my little Datsun, my first car, and fanging it to Channel 10, trying to learn my lines on the way." She mimes holding the steering wheel while flipping script pages on the passenger's seat. "And getting there, spitting out the lines and moving on to the next scene. It was all very fast."

Minogue is celebrating 25 years in the music business this year, and is releasing a new video on the 25th of each month, for the whole year, to mark the occasion. She will also be serenading the Queen

tomorrow, at the jubilee concert at Buckingham Palace and headlining Proms in the Park in September. Recently, she has been trawling through old photos and footage to include in her greatest-hits album, out tomorrow, and it has brought long-dormant feelings to the surface. "I see images from when I did my first album, and I nearly cry. I just go, 'Oh my God, you're such a baby!' It's a whole lot of mixed emotions for me."

Minogue also gets emotional reflecting on that "dark and gloomy time" when she endured surgery and chemotherapy to survive cancer. Her eyes glisten in the late-afternoon sun; her voice begins to break ever so slightly. "It was just all gloom — but every mysterious person in these apartments around us has a story like mine, and we're here in Cannes and the sun's shining..."

Indeed we are, and later that day she gets to walk up Cannes' famed red carpet for Holy Motors's official screening, then bask in the sustained barrage of whoops and cheers that adds to the growing buzz among the clustered cineastes about Carax's comeback, and that it might just pip Michael Haneke's heavily favoured *Amour* for the *Palme d'Or*.

In the end, the jury passes over it, but nothing can detract from the fact that Kylie has made a belated acting comeback in the most entertainingly subversive and original film to emerge from this year's festival. As it drives off to a brighter future, so does Minogue. The ageless pop idol who has exerted such fierce control over her career now calls herself "a disciple" of the random prophet Carax, and insists we ain't seen nothing yet.

"There is a whole other side to me that is untapped," she trills. "I know it's there." She breaks into a mischievous smile. "I'm not just a shiny, happy person — and maybe the time is here for me to start feeding my other side a bit more." □