





Actress, singer, model, mother – Vanessa Paradis remains an enigma, and even when faced with rumours about her relationship with Johnny Depp she still manages to keep mum

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**V**ANESSA PARADIS is and has always been elusive. We know she sings, models and acts, but she refuses to be pinned down to any one label. We know she's Johnny Depp's long-term paramour and the mother of their two children, but in the league table of celebrity power couples, they're an ample distance behind Brangelina, and deliberately so. That must partly be to do with being French and privacy-loving, but also perhaps a by-product of her exposure to, and bruising by, fame at a tender age. Whatever the reasons, Vanessa Paradis remains something of an enigma, and that's exactly how she likes it.

Of the triumvirate of professions she applies herself to, acting has been treated most neglectfully, if not with outright disdain (interestingly, she has made nearly as many albums – ten – as she has films). She was a model and a singer first, becoming precociously famous at 14 when her single *Joe Le Taxi* became a pop smash in 15 countries. But she also received a French Cesar for Most Promising Actress for her 1989 film debut *Noce Blanche*, in which she starred as a precocious pupil (precocity was the defining theme of her youth) who falls into *amour fou* with her philosophy teacher. Rather than ever seeking to generate momentum, however, she has preferred to indulge in prolonged sabbaticals from screen acting, favouring music and her private life and turning down offers from admired auteurs like Pedro Almodovar. She and Depp have been together since the late 1990s, raising their two children, Lily-Rose and Jack, in various residences around the world, which include a French farmhouse and their own Bahamian island.

There are signs, however, that Paradis is feeling serious again about an acting career. A couple of years ago, she returned to UK screens in *Heartbreakers*, a bit of Gallic fluff that was predominantly memorable for a scene in which Paradis and Romain Duris recreated the climactic dance sequence from *Dirty Dancing*. Her new film, *Café de Flore*, is a far less gooey affair and doesn't exploit her gamine charms. In fact, it's the most deglamourised role she has ever played. Written and directed by French-Canadian Jean-Marc Vallée (*C.R.A.Z.Y.*, *The Young Victoria*), it's a spiritual drama that toys with themes of soulmates and past lives in telling two parallel stories: one, set in present-day Montreal, depicts the painful break-up of a marriage between a music producer and his wife; the other, set in 1969 Paris, features Paradis as a single mother raising a young son with Down's syndrome. Jacqueline is hard-edged, dowdy, a stern maternal force with a fierce obsession: the well-being of her boy. When I suggest Jacqueline is emotionally complicated, Paradis shoots me down, in good-natured fashion. "She's not complicated at all – she's super-clear," she retorts.

"She only has one goal in her life because she has nothing – no husband, no family, no friends, no money, nothing but the love she has to give this little boy. She lives with the threat of losing him so her goal is to make him survive and be strong. She's like a bull. She's a woman in love with her son."

She's also mildly terrifying, especially when

she feels her maternal devotion is under threat from another Down's child her son befriends at school. Even Paradis found it hard to fathom Jacqueline at times. "I couldn't always empathise with her as a mother myself but I also understand that it's way easier to judge a situation from the outside," she considers. "Where I relate to her is that she tries her best. She's not mean, she's not perverse, she's just scared. Fear can make all of us do the wrong things sometimes."

Watching Paradis march through *Café de Flore* in shapeless dresses and sensible shoes at first feels like the desperate cry of a performer known for her looks striving to be taken seriously. But it ends up being right for both character and actress, who admits it was part of the appeal for her while insisting she hasn't been scouting around to find deeply unsexy parts. "It's not my goal. I just look at the role and if it goes without glamour then so be it," she reflects. "It was a shock to read this script, and the fact that Jean-Marc offered me a character unlike any I've been offered before was irresistible. He didn't actually want me at first – we met for coffee while he was meeting with other actresses in France. But I called him later and he could see that I was so into it. I think it was that conversation that made him choose me."

"She's so different from me so I had to erase a bunch of things about myself," Paradis continues. "I couldn't be seductive, sensitive, vulnerable, feminine. It was clear that she had to be very masculine because she is both the mother and the father to this boy. I had to find that masculinity in myself." One of her methods was choosing to model her voice on Vallée's own – "minus the Quebecois accent", she laughs.

Paradis says she didn't exactly find it liberating playing such a resolutely drab



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character, but the role has revealed something intriguing: that as she approaches 40, she's letting herself age in a seemingly natural way. Her face is still striking, the cheekbones still elevated and the front teeth still with their famous gap. But she's no longer the doll-faced starlet of yore, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. If she can resist Botox and surgery, she has a face that looks capable of telling many more fascinating stories on screen. "The movies and the parts I'm being offered are becoming better and better," she agrees. "In the age that I am now, you get to play all kinds of situations that I couldn't play at 20 years old. The offers weren't interesting a few years ago. Now they are and I'm loving it."

*Café de Flore* is one of most interesting roles she has played. It's fair to say she gives a heartbreaking performance, and her efforts haven't gone unrewarded. In February, Paradis landed the Best Actress prize at Canada's equivalent to the Oscars, the Genies. Unable to show up in person, she gave Vallée a note to read out "just in case", in which she thanked "my amazing partner" – not Depp, but Marin Gerrier, the Down's syndrome boy who plays her son Laurent and "who added so much grace and humour and energy to our tandem".

It was Paradis's first experience of getting to know, let alone work with someone with Down's syndrome, and she admits there were obstacles. For one thing, she was afraid of scaring Gerrin – a first-time actor discovered by accident on another child's audition tape – in scenes where Jacqueline berates or punishes Laurent for perceived transgressions. "It was my biggest fear because with Down's syndrome, most of the time there is a problem with assimilation, of processing new information," she remarks. "It's a weird thing anyway for anybody – Down's syndrome or not – to be in some of the tough scenes we were playing. But he always knew that we were playing and that when it was done I was just Vanessa."

For another, while Gerrin was "very funny, a little angel, he was a demon as well," she says. "He was very stubborn and it wasn't easy a lot of the time." To help lighten the mood off-camera, Paradis organised parties for her two young Down's co-stars, as well as 12-year-old Lily-Rose and ten-year-old Jack. "They were so much fun," she smiles. "We danced, we ate fries, we drank Coca-Cola."

While *Café de Flore* seems to have reinvigorated her love of acting, music is still her first love, even if it has brought her mixed blessings. It's one thing to have a worldwide hit with your first record; it's another when its sheer ubiquity (and that youthful precocity) combine to generate a barrage of resentment, culminating in Paradis being spat at in the street. Just recently, she claimed the opprobrium she encountered as a teenage pop star forced her to walk around with a bag on her head, and that she was only able to survive it thanks to the love and support of her parents.

The former statement would sound apocryphal if it hadn't come from her own mouth (perhaps she meant it metaphorically); the latter is undoubtedly true. Paradis's parents, who raised her in the Parisian suburb of Villiers-sur-Marne, encouraged their daughter's passions with piano and dance lessons. Other mentors included her



➤ musician uncle Didier Pain and Serge Gainsbourg, who produced Paradis's second album when she was 17. She even lived in the house of the salacious rogue behind *Je T'Aime ... Moi Non Plus* and *Lemon Incest* for three months, although she recalls it as the most formative, confidence-enhancing time of her life.

During her pregnancies, Depp would play Gainsbourg's songs for her. Recently, though, the couple have encountered rumours that their relationship is on the rocks; that they're already leading separate lives. The speculation became so rife (including claims that Depp is seeing another actress), it prompted Paradis to go on a rare counter-attack in January. On the French talk show *Le Grand Journal*, she told host Michel Denisot none of it was true, stressing, "People say we split up every winter and that I'm on my 12th pregnancy".

While Paradis has resigned herself to idle speculation, she seems to find this latest salvo more threatening. But is

**MUM'S THE WORD** (Above, from left) Vanessa Paradis in *Café de Flore*; in her *Joe Le Taxi* days; and (previous page) with partner Johnny Depp



there anything revealing in her reply to a question about whether she believes in the concept of soulmates, as touched on in *Café de Flore*? "I don't like things set in stone," she says, sighing.

"I believe in love, obviously, but calling somebody a soulmate is like the end of your story already. You don't know. I want to believe that love lasts forever and when you go into a relationship you put 100 per cent of yourself into it. But to say, 'This is it'... You know this is it for the moment but there's something quite disturbing to me to talk about it with such finality. That's why what I like best is the present moment and no definite

answers. I don't believe you can say 'forever'; I don't believe it exists."

For the time being, she insists all is well in the Depp-Paradis orbit.

There's even the possibility they will appear together on screen. They came tantalisingly close with Terry Gilliam's *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, before a confluence of events conspired to torpedo that project. But Paradis is still hopeful that another project, in which she would star as author-philosopher Simone de Beauvoir and Depp would play her lover, American author Nelson Algren, will come to fruition one day. "It's a beautiful script and we both want to do it but we've got to find the time," she says. Or Depp has to take a breather from multi-million-dollar paydays.

For now, though, Paradis finds herself concentrating on her music again. She's currently holed up in the couple's Los Angeles mansion, "writing songs and finding inspirations" for her next album, which she plans to record



this autumn and release in early 2013, followed by a tour.

Why LA? It doesn't sound especially conducive to creativity when you own an island in the Bahamas. But Depp is in the midst of shooting Disney's \$215m blockbuster *The Lone Ranger* in the US, so keeping the clan together requires them to be on the west coast. As Paradis says, "I can do this musical preparation work anywhere." What about the children – are they happy being nomadic? "They like to travel," she says.

Don't be surprised if, after *Café de Flore*, Paradis decides to embark on another prolonged sabbatical from the big screen. "Music takes most of my time and I think always will," says this determinedly enigmatic woman. "I just love to sing and make records." ■

*Café de Flore* is released on Friday