

They're fighting on against the Matrix

The Wachowski Brothers are now brother and sister. Breaking a long silence, they explain why they felt 'cosmic forces at work' while making their new movie, *Cloud Atlas*. By Matt Mueller

Two men and a transgender woman walk into a hotel room. The woman turns to the taller of the two men and says: "I'm about to pull a mental hamstring." Her Teutonic companion strokes his chin and replies: "Nothing's impossible."

Sorry, there is absolutely no punchline to this setup; in fact, humour seems the furthest thing from anyone's mind as Lana and Andy Wachowski enter through the sliding glass door of a ground-floor suite at the Beverly Hilton in LA. But this encounter comes freighted with more import than most. Because the two siblings who once bestrode Hollywood like a mythical colossus, as the Wachowski

Brothers, are here to break a vow of silence that began with 1999's *The Matrix*.

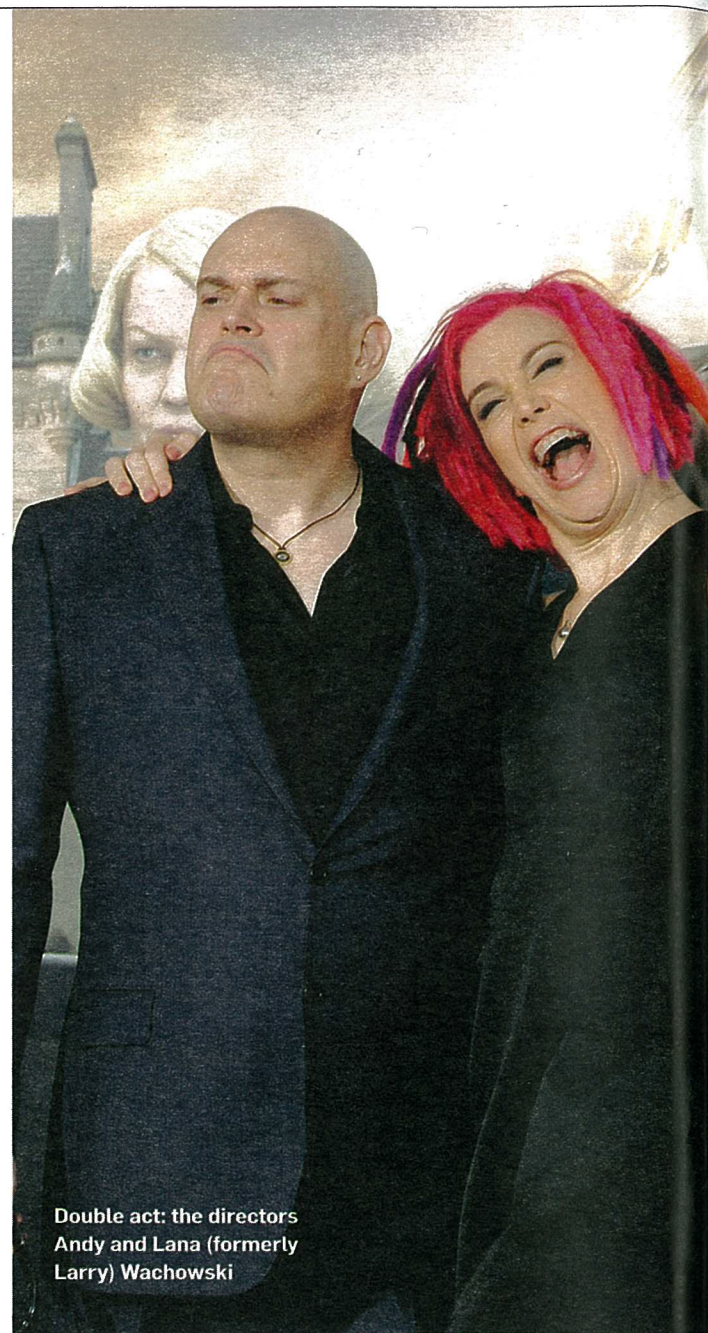
They have come ostensibly to discuss their new film, *Cloud Atlas*, but they will also be addressing the fact that, in the intervening years of silence, the artist formerly known as Larry has transformed into Lana, a tall, rangy woman who makes a striking impression in neon fuchsia dreadlocks, nasal, sibilant tones and a layered grey blouse exposing modest cleavage. They don't want to burn up on re-entry, so Tom Tykwer (*Run Lola Run*), their co-director on *Cloud Atlas*, is there as protective buttressing, resigned, it seems, to the role of gooseberry. Flanked by Tykwer on her left and her

burly younger brother on her right, Lana is the fulcrum.

The sixth film of their careers, *Cloud Atlas* is an adaptation of David Mitchell's feverishly adored 2004 novel, which spans six stories, six centuries and a multitude of characters. In the film, they are played by the likes of Tom Hanks, Halle Berry, Hugh Grant, Hugo Weaving, Jim Sturgess and Ben Whishaw, born and reborn and linked from one life to the next by threads both transparent and tenuous. Take Sturgess's journey: he begins, in a 19th-century strand set in the South Pacific, as a browbeaten actuary sparked into an act of salvation by a stowaway slave; and becomes, in 22nd-century Seoul, an abolitionist revolutionary fighting to overthrow a consumerist corpocracy that is reliant on enslaved clones.

Other journeys are less obvious or, in the case of Grant and Weaving, nonexistent. They inhabit the nasty evil-doer roles: a tattooed cannibal and dastardly CEO for Grant, a battleaxe nurse and a hissing, spinach-hued figment of Hanks's imagination for Weaving. You can see why so many actors were keen.

Natalie Portman gave the Wachowskis a copy of Mitchell's novel on the set of *V for Vendetta*, which the pair co-wrote, produced and directed substantial chunks of, by all accounts. "I



Double act: the directors Andy and Lana (formerly Larry) Wachowski

started giving it to all of our friends as the best book of the 21st century," says Lana, who, for obvious reasons, felt a strong affinity to its themes of a soul's transcendence beyond the boundaries of ethnicity, gender or sexuality. They were also hooked by the dramatic, genre-hopping possibilities in this uncynical tale of hope and human connectivity, which is imbued with secular and spiritual

philosophies. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, for one, deserves a screen credit for the narrative's core principle that good and evil exist in everyone. The duo wanted to reflect the sensibilities of their own upbringing at the hands of a diehard atheist father and a Catholic-turned-shamanist mother. As Lana points out, these themes are part of the DNA of all their films. *Cloud Atlas* even features a messianic figure



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Nan Goldin Kenny putting on make-up, Boston 1973 (detail) © Nan Goldin

CLOUD ATLAS: can you tell who's behind the make-up?





GREGG DEGUIRE/WIREIMAGE

resurrections, and the patchwork quilt of financing — including a chunk of their own fortune — that rescued it from oblivion. The siblings had ample reason to feel discouraged, but Andy insists that he, too, felt “cosmic forces at work, and these amazing parallels between reality and fiction the whole way along”.

Unsurprisingly, he is fiercely protective of the elder sibling he called brother until a few years ago. “It’s not like Lana was knocked over the head and now she’s a totally different person,” he growls. “This is not Regarding Henry.” Lana claps her hands together and rocks back in hysterics — she’s a great cackler — stamping her feet on the carpet and snorting her amusement through her nose. “She is the same person. She’s just engendered differently, and the sooner we can get people understanding that... This is all part of the normalisation process.”

Lana picks up his train of thought. “The pathology lies in a culture that wants to see gender as a binary thing, whereas it’s a spectral thing. The projection onto people like me is this convention that you want to make everyone fit. In the same way that some people look at the movie and get upset because it doesn’t fit into a conventional mould, people get angry because I represent something that transcends their limited definition of what gender is.”

Rousing himself from a daydream, Tykwer suddenly chips in that the film is “our baby — it’s come out of the spiritual love-making between the three of us”. Lana echoes his febrile sentiment: “Tom was making a movie about threesomes that looked at future family dynamics at the same time we were discussing Cloud Atlas.” That film, *3*, is a chamber piece in which a straight German couple have an affair with the same man, before they all end up as one happy troika. “It’s not one of those movies that says, ‘It’s not

possible!’ It’s a movie that says, ‘Why not?’ Tykwer explains. “That was our experience making Cloud Atlas.”

For the record, both Wachowskis are married, Andy to his college sweetheart and Lana to her second wife, a woman she hasn’t named publicly, but who is widely assumed to be the former West Coast dominatrix Ilsa Strix. They met in 2002, shortly after cataclysmic suicidal impulses led Larry to reveal his true identity to his parents and Andy. Lana has recounted the torment of growing up feeling like a girl trapped in a boy’s body, and being “the Polish family that no one liked” in a mostly Irish neighbourhood. Back then, the Wachowski clan circled the wagons around their vulnerable, severely bullied son, with Larry retreating into an insular world of books, movies and role-playing games. “Andy and I did all of those things together, and making movies became a natural extension of that play,” she explains.

Beyond the obvious physical modifications, what are the most significant changes? “It’s opened up doors in my life and my experience with my friends and my family,” she says. “My relationships don’t have the same heaviness or feeling of inauthenticity. That is all gone from my life.” Andy claims Lana is easier to work with than Larry, while Weaving, who has been their villain of choice since playing Agent Smith in *The Matrix*, describes them as “more individuated now. I never used to get separate notes from them on set, and now I do.”

Andy bristles when I mention that their father once described them as having “two bodies, one brain”. “People talk about us having one mind, like, ‘Oh, they finish each other’s sentences, they’re not of this earth — burn them, burn the witch!’ But it’s just the trickery of having planned out all the big decisions before we get to the set.”

After *The Matrix* shifted Hollywood’s consciousness with its cyberpunk stylings and groundbreaking effects (read what you will into its pervasive theme of a man who must free his mind from rigid oppression to become his true self), it appeared the Wachowskis were poised to dominate Hollywood. If the two *Matrix* sequels disappointed because they weren’t, well, *The Matrix* (and were a mite pretentious), they were still dazzling examples of unbridled ambition and craft. *Speed Racer*, on the other hand, knocked a hefty dent into their reputations. They are not overly receptive to criticism, blaming critics and audiences for failing to embrace their lofty intentions of making a film for the gamer generation that would redefine the mainstream visual aesthetic. Lana branded *Speed Racer* cinema’s “first cubist film”, rather than the headache-inducing debacle many found it to be.

As much vim, vigour and personal passion as they’ve poured into *Cloud Atlas*, the film tanked in America, although it is doing better overseas, suggesting that audiences Stateside were never likely to buy into its karmic momentousness. That has to hurt. (The Wachowskis were not available for a second interview.) And they can’t close Pandora’s Box now: even more is on the

line with their next film, an original science-fiction epic called *Jupiter Ascending*. They possibly had a sense of foreboding when we met in L.A. On her way out of the back door, Lana grabbed my hand — as, apparently, she had been doing to journalists throughout the press tour — and pleaded, a tad forlornly: “Help us, please.”

After being hailed as visionary geniuses for so long, it seems harder now for the siblings to be embraced. Lana has even faced criticism that she is using victimhood to sell tickets. That’s a harsh reading of the courage it must have taken to face up to a lifetime of torment. But it’s hard to think of another big-budget American film that has been more divisive in recent years: *Cloud Atlas* landed on several “worst of 2012” lists, including *Time* magazine’s, which slated it as a “bloated fantasia”.

Yet it is a film with palpable heart and empathy, qualities not always evident in the Wachowskis’ previous work. They are skilled, original film-makers who bring an intriguingly “other” perspective to bear in a testosterone-dominated industry. There are so few influential feminine voices in Hollywood. Having another one in the mix should be seen as a blessing, not a disaster. □

Cloud Atlas opens on Friday

reminiscent of *The Matrix*’s Neo, named Sonmi-451, who rises to oppose an insidiously oppressive power structure.

Of the two, Lana appears the more intense and theoretical; Andy takes a back seat to his sister, but is also gregarious, a barrel of a man who is like a less jovial Seth Rogen decked out as a nightclub bouncer. He’s the details man, recounting the project’s multiple deaths and



Rogues’ gallery:
from left, if right
way up, Hugh
Grant; Halle
Berry; Grant; Ben
Whishaw; Grant;
Hugo Weaving;
Berry; Berry;
Tom Hanks

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