

Change of SCENE

Having made her name in mainstream hits, Eva Mendes is forging a more challenging path with edgier roles in independent films

By MATT MUELLER

As soon as she burst onto the scene as Denzel Washington's girlfriend in the 2001 police-corruption thriller *Training Day*, Eva Mendes was a face to watch, swiftly stepping onto the trail blazed by Jennifer Lopez to become one of the hottest Hispanic actresses in Hollywood. Seizing her shot at fame with gusto, she went on to appear in a string of hits including *2 Fast 2 Furious*, *Ghost Rider* and *Hitch*, the latter a big-budget romantic comedy in which she starred opposite Will Smith.

But following that thrilling five-year ride, Mendes took stock and changed tack. She chose to shift her career out of the mainstream and into the somewhat riskier terrain of independent and art-house cinema. The Mendes revolution kicked off with James Gray's dark urban drama *We Own the Night* in 2007, continued with Werner Herzog's *The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call – New Orleans* two years later, and has led this year to a starring role in writer-director Derek Cianfrance's *The Place Beyond the Pines*.

"It's the performance I'm most proud of," she beams of her role as Romina, a diner waitress and struggling single mother who falls for Ryan Gosling's tattooed bad boy. "I don't know another American filmmaker right now who would do something as brave and unconventional as Derek has. It's so ambitious."

Mendes is referring to the fact that a third of the way through *The Place Beyond the Pines*, Gosling's motorcycle-stunt-rider-turned-bank-robber fades from the story, and one of the small-town New York policemen who has been pursuing him, played by Bradley Cooper, becomes the focus. Mendes remains part of the narrative throughout, as her son's life becomes entangled with that of Cooper's son. As soon as Mendes saw Cianfrance's 2010 film *Blue Valentine* – "back before all the hype" – she knew she wanted to work with the director and had her manager arrange a meeting. But after the heart-rending performance he'd extracted from Michelle Williams in *Blue Valentine*, Cianfrance had a string of Hollywood leading ladies banging at his door, so he still required Mendes to audition for *The Place Beyond the Pines*.

Mendes took a chance, arriving at the audition wearing no make-up apart from dark lipstick, along with dowdy hair and clothing. When Cianfrance walked past her twice without recognising her, she felt she was onto something and suggested an alternative approach in the audition room. "I said, 'Look, I know you're an unconventional filmmaker so instead of reading scenes, why don't I take you for a ride and show you where I grew up?'"



Like Romina, Mendes is a first-generation American whose parents arrived in the US from Cuba. She grew up first in Miami and then the Silver Lake and Echo Park neighbourhoods of Los Angeles, eventually moving to Glendale with her mother and sister after her parents divorced. Raised a Catholic, she initially aspired to be a nun (she still feels guilty shooting sex scenes, she confesses), and studied marketing at California State University before dropping out to become an actress. Her career didn't start auspiciously: she was a B-movie horror queen for years, but kept working on her craft, eventually earning her break with *Training Day*.

Working with Gosling was a treat for Mendes. The pair had known each other for years, and Mendes calls her co-star "an incredible actor. I learned a lot from him, as well as Bradley Cooper. Bradley had a very difficult task, coming into the film as late as he does, and I thought he did a beautiful job. The kids [up-and-comers Emory Cohen and Dane DeHaan] were great, too – I just think the whole cast was stellar."

Mendes and Gosling shot all of their scenes in sequence during the first three weeks of the shoot. With the second half of the film leaping ahead 15 years, Mendes didn't ►

FROM TOP With Ryan Gosling in *The Place Beyond the Pines*; starring opposite Will Smith in *Hitch*; with Nicolas Cage in *The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call – New Orleans*

want to jeopardise her performance with audience-distracting prosthetics; she was determined to convey Romina's ageing by "looking exhausted and haggard", shaving off most of her eyebrows and wearing no make-up save for some applied to create the illusion of deeper creases. She was thrilled with the results. "When I first saw the film, I was so excited at how awful I looked," she laughs. "I said, 'I look like hell – this is awesome!'"

While *The Place Beyond the Pines* was a workout for the 38-year-old actress, her role in infant terrible Leos Carax's 2012 film *Holy Motors* was far less taxing. Taking on a role originally written for Kate Moss, Mendes

moved little except her eyes as a mute supermodel who gets kidnapped by a goblin-esque creature (Denis Lavant) and spirited away to his underground lair. It's a perplexing film and a surprising detour: the realms of French art house are not where one would expect to find Mendes. But she says she adored the experience.

"When Leos said to me, 'We see you on a tomb at Père Lachaise [Cemetery], you're a sexy robot with no emotion, and you have no dialogue, except you sing a lullaby at the end to Denis,' I said, 'I'm in,'" she smiles. "It was so weird and yet incredible to do, especially because Père Lachaise is one of my favourite places in the world. I see myself as really taking risks now, and I'm so excited about where things are going. When I look at my career, I just think, tip of the iceberg."

Mendes keeps herself inspired by continuing to study acting near her home in the Hollywood neighbourhood of Los Feliz (she's recently been immersed in Molière's *Tartuffe*), and embarking on a voracious reading schedule (currently focusing on *A Literate Passion: Letters of Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller*). She is also, somewhat surprisingly, a huge fan of British director Mike Leigh. "I'm dying to work with him. His films just get me right *here*," she says, making a fist and placing it on her chest. "He gets performances that are so organic and heartbreaking and real. I'm really into process, and his process sounds incredible." It's hard to picture Leigh finding a part in one of his films for a Hispanic-American beauty, but stranger things have happened.



She even wrote to him a few years ago and later marched up to him at an awards ceremony to ask if he had received her letter.

As the Cianfrance and Leigh examples attest, Mendes – who has been a spokesperson for brands from Cartier and Campari to Reebok and Revlon (along with having her own home-decoration and bedding lines) – is not shy when it comes to putting herself forward. She cites Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar as "another one I've been after for years". It's all about working with people at the top of their game. "I want to work with actors and directors who are great," she says. "It's like playing a tennis match. You might want to play against someone you can beat, but you don't want to play someone you can kill. You want a good match. Great performances elevate you, and working with great directors is like having the best coaches in your corner." ■

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

***The Place Beyond the Pines* opens on 12th April in the UK**



Stills from *Hitch* and *The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call – New Orleans* Rex Features