

Making her mark

Effortlessly talented and utterly poised, **Jessica Chastain** is an actress who simultaneously combines the glamour of old-age Hollywood with a penchant for portraying real, gritty and very modern women on-screen, as *Jan Janssen* discovers

Jessica Chastain has long been known for playing steely and often solitary women. From *Zero Dark Thirty* to *The Martian* to *Miss Sloane*, this graceful performer has distinguished herself as arguably the finest actress of her generation. She brings a simmering intensity to her work that is as authentic as it is compelling, complete with an underlying sense of intent.

Those qualities were nowhere more in evidence than in her 2017 film, *Molly's Game*, in which she played a former U.S. ski champion (Molly Bloom) who gained notoriety for organising illicit high stakes poker games for movie stars and mobsters alike.

"I wanted to play Molly because I saw her as the kind of complicated woman that we need to portray more often in films," Chastain says.

"Rather than presenting women as angelic portraits of perfection or sexy objects of desire, I am interested in playing authentic women, women that I know in my life who make mistakes, are noble sometimes, are competitive sometimes, and who can get quite messy sometimes."

Her commitment to women's rights has seen her become one of the most ardent supporters of the #MeToo movement that was set in motion in September 2017, amid multiple sexual assault allegations

levelled against infamous Hollywood movie mogul, Harvey Weinstein. Not only did his downfall coincide with a clarion call for equal pay for women in the film industry, but it also fuelled the resurgence of the feminist movement itself.

Chastain, who is by her own admission reluctant to draw the spotlight unto herself when not promoting her films, has emerged as a highly vocal proponent of women's rights as well as a key participant in the Time's Up Legal Defense Fund, which has raised nearly \$30m for women who have experienced workplace sexual harassment, abuse and assault.

In keeping with her commitment, Chastain made a splash at the Cannes Film Festival last May where she unveiled her latest film project, *355*, a female-driven spy thriller, together with several other prominent actresses – Penelope Cruz, Marion Cotillard, Lupita Nyong'o (all Oscar winners) and Chinese star Fan Bingbing.

"We independently financed it," Chastain said.

"And all five of us own equity in the film. I love the idea about creating this movie and seeing that these women aren't just people for hire. [Look at] Susan Sarandon or Jessica Lange or Sissy Spacek. You wonder: These incredible actresses, where are they now? Why did they disappear for so long? It was

a system that wasn't working. And so I thought, 'Well, what if we now take the power and give it to the actresses?'"

Proving her point, the film turned out to be the biggest sale at Cannes with the news that Universal Studios had paid \$20m to acquire the rights to the project. Following on the heels of other female-fronted projects such as *Wonder Woman* (starring Gal Gadot) which earned a record-breaking \$800m for a female superhero film, and HBO TV's *Big Little Lies* (produced by and starring Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman), Chastain's *355* production is merely a harbinger of the future. For her part, she intends to focus almost exclusively on films where she can play characters that will serve as role models for young women everywhere.

"I want to be able to play characters that will represent women as leaders and fighters. We also need to be shown in many different lights – as caring and loving individuals in addition to being

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Right: Society's leading lady Jessica Chastain is charting a new path for female actresses in Hollywood and across the world

intelligent and creative. I've always believed that women need to be able to work hard to change society and contribute in every way they can.

"I'm drawn to playing women who are able to rise to the occasion and make their mark in the world. Women have long been subject to so many constraints and obstacles that have prevented us from achieving as much as we could. Women have not been given the place that we deserve in terms of our contribution to society and our role in history."

She believes that a corresponding sea change in women's attitudes needs to begin at a young age: "Society mostly values women for their sexual desirability. Look at this #MeToo movement we're in. Women at a very young age are taught that to be important – to be seen – is to be pretty. Boys are taught that to be important is to be strong."

Chastain's acting dreams were set in motion by the example and experience of her grandmother whose early artistic ambitions were thwarted by the social conventions of her era.

"My grandmother Marilyn was a huge influence in my life," Chastain recalls.

"As a young woman, she had aspirations of becoming an actress but she never really got the chance. She was part of a generation of women where there was a lot of pressure to get married and have children and be a mom.

But she saw in me someone who had the same kind of ►





artistic ambitions that she had and was the one who took me to my first play, where David Cassidy was starring in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical. I was seven at the time and as soon as the curtain went up, and a girl my age was on stage and starting to speak, that's when I knew what I wanted to do with my life. As soon as I got home, I announced to my parents: 'I'm going to be an actress.'"

That process began in earnest in New York City where she studied acting at the renowned Julliard School for the performing arts, one of 20 promising high school students chosen from amongst 1,400 students in the U.S. who applied for the four-year programme.

Above: Chastain and husband Gian Luca Passi de Preposulo on the red carpet at the 2019 Golden Globe Awards at the Beverly Hilton Hotel **Right:** Chastain participated in Comic Con Experience 2018 after the release of *X-Men: Black Phoenix*

A native of northern California where she was raised by her vegan chef mother and fireman stepfather in modest circumstances, Chastain thrived in the fertile creative environment that the school fostered

and big city life in general. "No one in my family outside of my grandma had any idea of what Julliard was," Chastain recalled. "Even after I was accepted and told my mother about it, she was terrified about my going to New York and worried about how she and my dad were going to find the money to pay for me to go and live in New York.

"But then I won a [Julliard] scholarship that Robin Williams had set up and I was never so happy in my life. Getting into Julliard was a huge event in my life and ever since I've always been so happy whenever I get a part and I'm able to do this kind of work. I live for it.

"I just absorbed everything about the city and its love of culture and the arts. It was this incredible world that I suddenly found myself exploring and feeling a part of the life of the city. At Julliard, I remember times when Mikhail Baryshnikov would sit down at a lunch table or I would get on an elevator and Yo-Yo Ma would be in it. Lincoln Center was just around the corner and I would

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see so many incredible performances and films."

Upon graduation, Chastain struggled for nearly a decade to find meaningful roles. But in 2011 she exploded onto the film landscape when she suddenly found herself appearing in six films, that by wicked coincidence were all released that same year. The most significant of those were *The Debt*, in which she played an Israeli Mossad agent; *The Tree of Life*, opposite Brad Pitt, as well as the Oscar-nominated *The Help*, which earned her rave reviews and a best supporting actress Oscar nomination for her co-starring role as the oddball but otherwise enlightened black sheep of a racist Mississippi town. ➤





Chastain's work in Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), as the CIA agent who was instrumental in hunting down Osama bin Laden earned her yet another Oscar nominations, this time for Best Actress, and she has not looked back since. She has also managed to cultivate an image for herself as an actress known for playing women who succeed in a man's world. A classic example of that came in *Miss Sloane* (2016), where she played a ruthless Washington D.C. lobbyist. "The great thing about Miss Sloane is that she challenges the idea of what we think a woman should be," Chastain observed. "She was a crusader, but she was also a woman who was willing to fight as hard as any man and

worked as hard as any man to win her cases.

"It's rare that in Hollywood we tell stories where women are shown to be rebels and outsiders, and that's what I loved about this film and how it shows that a woman can be just as tough as any man."

Not that Chastain herself in person is anywhere near as strident as Sloane or some of her other screen alter egos? "I wish! (Laughs) I wish I could be as intimidating and as determined as that. But it's hard for me to be as tough as you need to be in those situations or when you're arguing with someone... But I'm getting better at it!"

The 42-year-old Jessica Chastain lives in a sprawling Victorian apartment overlooking

Central Park in New York City with her Italian nobleman husband, Gian Luca Passi de Preposulo, 36, a fashion executive at Moncler. They have spent the past six years together and were married in June of 2017 in an exclusive ceremony held in Treviso, Italy. Last year they became parents to a baby girl, Giulietta Passi Chastain, born via a surrogate.

In the coming months Chastain will be appearing in several major new releases including the highly anticipated horror flick, *It: Chapter Two*, based on the Stephen King novel, and *Eve*, a crime drama in which she plays an assassin opposite John Malkovich, Geena Davis, and Colin Farrell. She also intends to remain an outspoken

advocate on behalf of women: "I get tremendous satisfaction from playing women who push the envelope and fight for their place and recognition in society. We need to keep telling those kinds of stories to inspire young women to aspire to great things... and I feel an obligation to contribute something to society and to create or be part of projects that create discussion and inspire people."

We wouldn't have expected anything less. ■

Above: Chastain on the Cannes Film Festival red carpet in 2012 for *Madagascar 3: Europe's Most Wanted* in which she plays the voice of Gia, the inquisitive and free-willed jaguar