



Atomic woman

Charlize Theron, the statuesque South African actress, whose brazen attitude towards life is every bit a match for her hard graft and deserved success, remains as outspoken and fearless as ever, writes *Harold von Kursk*

Raised by a strong-willed Dutch-German mother, Charlize Theron learned early on how to stand up for herself and carve out her own destiny as an independent-minded woman. Meeting her in person, though, she's far more lighthearted than her movie roles would suggest.

Theron speaks with a relaxed sense of confidence, although there's always a slight hint in her dazzling eyes that she's ready to fire back if provoked. It's that looming intensity of course that makes her one of the most formidable actresses of her generation owing to powerful performances in dark dramas such as *Young Adult*, *The Burning Plain*, *North Country*, and *Monster*, for which she won the 2004 Oscar.

Recently, however, Theron surprised audiences with her comic turn in *Long Shot*, a raunchy comedy co-starring Seth Rogen, an acknowledged master of the genre. Theron plays a U.S. Secretary of State who hires a former childhood friend turned journalist, Fred Flarsky (Rogen), to serve as her speechwriter while she prepares to run for President. Their working relationship quickly turns romantic amid plenty of comic mayhem between the pair.

Long Shot marked her first-ever rom-com outing, and that was why she was initially reluctant to commit to the project, worried she wouldn't be able to match her co-star's comic "genius," as she put it.

"I sincerely love Seth Rogen's

work and the idea of doing something with him was really appealing to me," Theron says.

"I didn't really know what that would look like in a film, though, but when he called me and sent me the script it was pretty clear to me that we could pull this off together."

As it turned out, 44-year-old Theron thrived on the chance to be funny and light-hearted as opposed to dark, doomed, or deadly as she proved in her sleeper hit 2017 action film, *Atomic Blonde*.

"I usually die in my movies or kill people in my movies, or get assaulted," she explains.

"This is not my wheelhouse. But I've been like a sincere, down-to-the-core-of-my-body fan of Seth Rogen's. I have watched everything that he's touched, and never in a million years did I think I would be in a movie with him, so I am hashtag blessed! I'm really, really happy with how things turned out."

Theron's road to success is a lesson in perseverance. Growing up on her parents' isolated farm on the outskirts of Johannesburg, she was as far removed from Hollywood as one could ever imagine. But Charlize was an ambitious young woman imbued with the independent spirit of her mother, Gerda Maritz, who ran the family construction company. Gerda wanted to encourage her daughter's artistic sensibility and enrolled her in ballet class at four. It was a fortuitous decision that enabled Theron to escape a troubled home –

her father was a violent and abusive alcoholic – and explore a more beautiful world. "What dance gave me was a safe place to explore," she said.

"It was innocent, and later it was a place to escape my home life and the trauma of being a teenager. I could use my body to work through things, it gave me a great understanding of the space I take up, and the power I had in that space, and how much you can say with a hand movement or how you move your head."

At the age of 16, the statuesque 5'10" Theron won first place in a local modelling contest and was soon whisked away to Milan, eventually landing in New York where she enrolled in the prestigious Joffrey Ballet School so she could pursue her terpsichorean dreams.

That ambition was thwarted however when Charlize wrecked her knee – her doctor told her that her dancing days were over – and subsequently fell into a severe depression. But Gerda wasn't going to let her to wallow in self-pity and helped pull her then 18-year-old daughter out of the abyss. Soon

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Theron was on a plane to Los Angeles in pursuit of an acting career. But after numerous failed auditions, she was again left broke, desperate, and disillusioned. Fate intervened when a talent scout spotted Theron inside a bank.

In an oft-told story, the scout "discovered" her after witnessing the spectacle of Theron screaming in her distinct Afrikaans accent at an intransigent bank teller who refused to cash a cheque her mother had sent so she could pay her rent. This led to her being cast in *2 Days in the Valley* (1996), the dark indie satire that marked her feature film debut and immediately caught the attention of the Tinseltown.

"I had been in L.A. for about ten months," Theron recalled.

"I really didn't know where my life was going to go... I think my naivety and stupidity kind of helped me in a weird way... When you're looking back at your life... you have to be grateful. You sometimes look at things like, 'I don't even know how that happened.' My journey is so bizarre..."

That breakthrough performance led to a co-starring role opposite Keanu Reeves in *The Devil's Advocate* in 1997, followed by a glamorous turn as a vain and impetuous model in Woody Allen's *Celebrity*. It wasn't until her Oscar triumph in *Monster* though that Theron was able to call the shots on a career that has seen her alternate seamlessly between critically-acclaimed indie projects – the latest of which was 2018's *Tully* – and the mass market blockbuster fare of *Fate of the Furious*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *Prometheus*, *Snow White and the Huntsman*, et al.

Throughout this process, Theron has continued to count on her mother Gerda's guidance and close

Left: Theron on the red carpet during the 70th edition of Cannes Film



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friendship, and regularly cites her as a powerful role model. “My mother has taught me to stand up for myself and be courageous,” she nods.

“I’m not someone who indulges in self-pity and I hate it if I ever start feeling sorry for myself. I was raised in a way that I should never allow myself to be the victim, but to take responsibility for my decisions and my actions and live as boldly as possible.

“She has given me a lot of guidance on that level. She’s someone who believes in not dwelling on the past and getting on with your life. I’m trying to live in those terms. I want to live the way I want to and not think back fifty years from now why I didn’t live my life when I had the chance. You have

to be willing to go through the highs and lows and keep moving forward.”

That attitude has carried over into Theron’s decision to do double duty as both producer and star on many of her films, most notably

Monster, *The Burning Plain* and *Dark Places*.

But perhaps her most ambitious project to date has been *Atomic Blonde*, which she spent five years developing and producing. Theron

not only wanted to play a character that was a weaponised extension of her own rather formidable persona, she also liked the idea of indulging her frustrated athletic side that dates back to her past life as a dancer. Released in 2017, the film racked up \$100m in admissions, earning a modest profit on its relatively modest \$30m budget while also garnering strong reviews. In the role of British MI6 agent Lorraine Brighton, Theron displays the kind of martial arts skills that would make any male action-hero contemporary proud. Her character is just as capable of spiking a man in the neck with her heel as she is seducing a female French spy. Having spent five years ▶



Top: Seth Rogen, Charlize Theron and David Oyelowo at the American Cinematheque Award Gala honouring Theron at the Beverly Hilton Right: Charlize Theron attends the Premiere of *Long Shot* at AMC Lincoln Center Theater in April 2019



developing *Atomic Blonde*, a sequel is now in the works and Theron is highly enthusiastic about having added the description “female action hero” to her CV.

“People are always perplexed when I say that I enjoy all genres, including action movies,” she says.

“I was a ballerina for 12 years, so maybe that’s why I’m very attracted to physical roles. I enjoy telling a story with my body and not just verbally.

“I wanted to take the concept of the spy thriller and turn it on its head. I liked the physicality of the story and I’ve always enjoyed telling stories that way that even though I haven’t done that many action films I really wanted to get into that for this film. I’ve been doing this over 20 years, and this has been a special experience for me.”

For a woman as explosively formidable and arrestingly beautiful as Theron, she has led a comparatively subdued romantic life. The real love of her life thus



far has been Irish actor Stuart Townshend. They spent nine years together before their relationship ended in 2010. Theron felt so close

Top: As Elaine Markinson in *Gringo*, where dark comedy meets white knuckle ride
Above: At the 89th Annual Academy Awards in 2017

to Townshend that she said that they often described themselves as “husband and wife” and had no need for a marriage contract or a wedding ceremony. Their breakup hit Charlize hard, and she didn’t work for the next two years.

“I’ve been in serious relationships from the time I was 19 and I’m single for the first time in my

life since then,” she notes.

“I had to make a real conscious effort to rediscover myself and it’s hard. I’m a creature who really found her comfort zone in relationships, but there’s something really powerful in being OK with being alone, especially for women.”

Perhaps heeding her own advice, Theron decided she didn’t need to be with a man to start a family. Just as she was returning to acting with *Young Adult*, Theron adopted a four-month-old baby boy, subsequently named Jackson, in 2012. Three years later she would adopt daughter August, now four. Theron has found motherhood to be a generally joyous and delightful challenge.

“I waited a long time to become a mother. Motherhood has changed my life and exceeded all my hopes and expectations. It’s such a beautiful feeling to hold your children in your arms and be able to watch them grow and discover the world.” ■