



# Beyond Black Widow

Scarlett Johansson thrives on being a fiercely independent woman, writes **Harold von Kursk**. As outspoken as she is self-assured, the native New Yorker has always maintained an uncompromising attitude towards life...

According to *Forbes*, 35-year-old Scarlett Johansson ranks as Hollywood's highest-paid female star, with annual earnings of \$56 million (as of 2019). And multiple appearances as Black Widow in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has propelled her to the highest-grossing actress in history with career box-office earnings of \$3.1 billion.

Johansson is one of those rare performers who has been able to win praise for her work in studio blockbusters as well as acclaimed dramas such as Woody Allen's *Match Point* and last year's *Marriage Story*, the low-budget indie film for which she received her first ever Best Actress Oscar nomination. Her portrayal of a mother who decides to end her crumbling marriage (played by Adam Driver) earned Johansson rave reviews and revealed the astonishing level of pathos she is able to bring to her work.

Now she's back in blockbuster mode with *Black Widow*, her first solo outing in the role she first made famous a decade ago in *Iron Man 2* and subsequently in various installments of The Avengers franchise. In the guise of Natasha Romanoff a.k.a Black Widow, Johansson has gained a massive international following as a female

superhero who kicks ass while strutting around in a body-hugging spandex suit. The opportunity to star in her own standalone *Black Widow* film is a milestone in her glittering career.

"It's a dream come true," Johansson says.

"I could never imagine ten years ago that I would one day be making my own standalone *Black Widow* film... There's a lot of fight scenes in it, and I remember the producers saying while we were making it that they didn't think that we had ever done this much fighting [in a Marvel film]."

Indeed, the acclaimed actress recalled how her strategic pivot to the action genre was questioned by industry observers at the time, although she admits to being a major fan of superhero movies.

"People were surprised that I wanted to play a comic book heroine," Johansson recalls.

"But I loved *Iron Man*, and I met with Marvel to see what was possible. I had done my research, and the Black Widow character resonated with me. She is dark and has faced death so many times that she has a deep perspective on the value of life. In the sequel, you learn more about the sadness in her past... Black Widow is a superhero, but she's also human. She's small, but she's

strong. It's hard not to admire her. She packs a big punch.

"It's only fitting that now she has her own movie and her own story to tell. The Avengers' films gave me the opportunity to be one of the boys, and the public craved a stronger female presence in that world. Also, it was very important to me personally that (in the new *Black Widow* movie) Natasha is able to show more facets and develop as a woman in the same way that I have done in my own life.

"I wanted the character to carry the weight of all we've come to know about her over the last ten years. I didn't want the character to change just because it's a stand alone story – I wanted her to be grounded in her history.

"I love making action films... It's been a real pleasure for me to play those multi-layers and to really be able to act and not just pose. I'm not just the romantic interest, and thank god for that.

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**SCARLETT JOHANSSON**

**Left: Hollywood star Scarlett Johansson at the red carpet photocall for *Marriage Story* during the 76th Venice Film Festival in 2019**

It makes it more interesting and interesting to watch, too."

Scarlett Johansson's own history has given her ample emotional grist to draw upon over the course of a remarkable screen journey that has veered between moving drama (*Marriage Story*) to sci-fi thrillers (*Ghost in the Shell*) to her muse-like association with Woody Allen (she remains a close friend and supporter) which, apart from the Oscar-nominated *Match Point*, saw her star in the comedies *Vicki Cristina Barcelona* and *Scoop*.

Scarlett grew up in very modest circumstances in New York City. Her Danish father, Karsten Johansson, was an unemployed architect for much of her youth while her mother Melanie Sloan tried to hold the family (Scarlett and her three siblings) together. It was only a few years ago that Johansson first spoke about how her parents often relied on government welfare and food stamps to carry them through the worst times.

The strain ultimately led to her parents' divorce when Scarlett was 13. This was the point at ➤



She then famously married Canadian heartthrob Ryan Reynolds in 2008 and spent three years with him during which time she was adamant about keeping their private life under wraps. Their 2011 separation came as a surprise to most people, although Johansson admitted in an interview last year that she probably married too young. “The first time I got married I was 23 years old,” she explained.

“I didn’t really have an understanding of marriage. Maybe I kind of romanticised it in a way.”

Three years later, she married Romain Dauriac, a French >

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which her mother took an active role in managing the aspiring child star’s career by taking her to countless auditions for commercials, TV shows and any work she could find. Though Johansson hated that highly competitive environment, the inevitable and “constant rejection” she endured at an early age taught her important life lessons in “discipline and determination”. Perhaps more importantly, the fees she would go on to earn from her acting jobs helped ease her family’s financial woes.

Johansson first burst onto the scene at the age of 12 in *The Horse Whisperer* before gaining serious attention as Bill Murrar’s soulmate in *Lost in Translation*. When she saw her career falter in her late twenties, Johansson rebranded herself by becoming

an action star in films like *The Avengers* and Luc Besson’s sci-fi thriller, *Lucy*.

Parallel to her three-act Hollywood sojourn consisting of early fame, a disappointing mid-twenties fall from grace, and then her spectacular rebirth as an action star, Scarlett has seen her personal life take some difficult detours.

A brief romance with Benicio Del Toro was followed by a year-long affair with her *Black Dahlia* co-star, Josh Hartnett.

**Above:** Scarlett Johansson with her star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 2012, two days before the opening of Marvel’s *The Avengers* **Right:** Johansson with *Marriage Story* co-star Adam Driver at the 57th New York Film Festival last year



journalist (now working as an art curator in New York City) with whom she has a six year-old daughter, Rose Dorothy. They split their time between their respective homes in Paris and New York during their three year relationship until she filed for divorce from Dauriac in 2017.

In a *Playboy* interview that year Scarlett raised some eyebrows with her comments about monogamy and the inherent risks of long-term relationships. "I don't think it's natural to be a monogamous person," she was reported as saying.

"I might be skewered for that, but I think it's work. It's a lot of work. And the fact that it is such work for so many people – for everyone – the fact of that proves that it is not a natural thing. It's something I have a lot of respect for and have participated in, but I think it definitely goes against some instinct to look beyond."

As is the case in *Marriage Story*, Johansson's real-life divorce was complicated by the fact that she and her French husband had to come to an agreement over custody arrangements, the kind of long-term battle that often traumatizes children. Interestingly, although Johansson was still suffering from the fallout of her own divorce from Dauriac, she deliberately avoided infusing her performance with specific incidents or recollections from that difficult chapter in her life: "I didn't feel like drawing on personal memories to give life to Nicole's pain. It was enough to be facing my own divorce and not connect that to anything I needed to feel as Nicole. It was much more therapeutic to be able to separate my own situation from Nicole's and simply throw myself into her state of mind rather than dwell on my own problems".



Today, Scarlett has seemingly cast aside doubts over monogamy and is currently engaged to departing *Saturday Night Live* writer and *Weekend Update* segment co-host Colin Jost, 38. They live in New York City together with Rose Dorothy. The couple share a history of growing up in New York although they support different Big Apple baseball teams

– she is a huge NY Yankees fan while Jost backs the cross-town rival New York Mets. Apart from that, she endorses her fiancé without reservation: "[Colin is] very optimistic, easygoing, funny, nice – those are the qualities that really drew me to him".

Happily for Johansson, her personal and private life appear to be enjoying a kind of

synchronicity. She's experienced an epiphany as far as her personal growth and harmony is concerned that has at least partly been informed by her work and choosing the right roles.

"I'm in a good phase in my career where I'm able to actually wait for stuff that's right," said Johansson recently while basking in the acclaim of *Marriage Story*.

"The idea of building a family, making a family, and having that work, I like that idea. I think that would be wonderful. I've always wanted that. I wanted that also in my marriage to my daughter's father as well. It just wasn't the right person. But I like that idea... I feel like I'm in a place in my life [where] I'm able to make more active choices. I'm more present, I think, than I've been before." ■



**Above:** Scarlett Johansson meets adoring fans after her 2012 Hollywood Walk of Fame ceremony **Left:** With comedian Colin Jost to whom she became engaged in May 2019 after dating for two years