

Fraught with ambition

Acting is therapy for the driven and talented Emma Stone, whose character Mia in *La La Land* was as close to a self-portrayal as any. As Harold von Holt reports, Stone is set to go from strength to strength in another blockbuster year

The odds against becoming a movie star are roughly on a par with winning an Olympic gold medal, driving in a Formula One race, or writing a best-seller. It requires an improbable combination of skill, determination, persistence, and good fortune to reach the pinnacle of any profession. And there's an added challenge for anyone hoping to crack the Hollywood A-list — although it does help to look like a screen idol, too.

Emma Stone has all those qualities and more. With her trademark raspy, low-pitched voice, endearing girl-next-door vibe, prodigious talent, self-belief and tireless work ethic, she has emerged as one of the leading performers of her generation. It was also fitting that she would win the best actress Oscar for her irresistible turn in *La La Land*, the 2016 musical drama that paid tribute to the magical allure of Hollywood.

After all, Stone knew that she wanted to act from her childhood days spent sitting on a couch with her father watching classic comedies from the 30s and 40s. Her ambition grew so intense that aged 15, she persuaded her parents let her move out of their home in Scottsdale, Arizona and move to Los Angeles and pursue her dream.

"I owe so much to my father and mother and their blind faith and optimism in me," recalls Stone.

"When I asked my parents to move to Los Angeles, they said yes. I was lucky to have parents who had faith in a 15-year-old to let me go and accomplish my dream."

That marked the beginning of her Hollywood odyssey. Living in a small L.A. flat together with her mother — that was the one condition her parents imposed on Emma — Stone will never forget the countless times she had to contend with the rejection from countless failed auditions. Having suffered from anxiety and panic attacks as a teenager, she needed to rely on an inexhaustible supply of self-belief to stay the course. "I lived with my mother in a small apartment in La Brea Park. I never went out by myself. I would always go out with my mom and we spent a lot of time going to the movies. I wasn't going to school and I didn't have any friends, zero social life, and I basically just studied at home and watched

a lot of movies and tried to learn as much about acting as I could.

"At the beginning nobody wanted to hire a 15-year-old actress with a deep and raspy voice. I sounded much older than I looked and I hated my voice at the time. But in another way, I was glad I sounded older because I never liked the idea of being a child. I was very precocious and I couldn't wait to be an adult. And at one point my voice really began to fit with who I am.

"Sometimes I felt lonely, but my mother made me feel very safe and supported. That gave me the confidence I needed to go to auditions and deal with all the rejection and the fear of not being able to make it. I never gave up, and slowly I was make my way into the business."

Stone didn't have long to wait. After landing a few minor parts in TV sitcoms, she gained recognition as a supporting player in the now classic 2007 teen comedy *Superbad* written by Seth Rogen. Three years later, she made her screen breakthrough as the lead actress in *Easy A* where her comic gifts catapulted her to overnight stardom.

Right: Emma Stone on the red carpet at Cannes Film Festival for the premiere of *Birdman*

This set her on steep career trajectory that saw her endear herself to audiences with sparkling turns in *Friends with Benefits* and *Crazy Stupid Love* (both 2011).

The success of those rom-coms led to her to winning the highly coveted role as Peter Parker's girlfriend Gwen Stacey in the *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), the superhero blockbuster that earned \$757 million at the global box-office.

Following roles in *Gangster Squad* and the Oscar-winning *Birdman*, Stone became the top-ranked actress in Hollywood with her portrayal of Mia, the wannabe actress in *La La Land*. Co-starring Ryan Gosling, the film earned six Oscar nominations including Stone's much-deserved win. In every sense, Stone was destined to play in a movie that celebrated the hopes and ambitions of aspiring performers — themes that resonated deeply with her.

"It's a story about the kind of madness you need to keep hoping in spite of everything and everyone, and the courage required to pursue your dreams even when they seem impossible," Stone said.

"What distinguishes *La La Land* is its hopefulness, joy, and beauty. The film is about dreaming, and hoping and working to achieve something. The characters might be cynical ➤

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about what they are going through, but the movie itself is in no way cynical. I think young people have fallen into cynicism, and making fun of things, and pointing out the flaws in everything. This movie is a call to young people to work hard and achieve their dreams instead of being cynical.”

The critical and commercial success of *La La Land* gave her the kind of bankability that enabled her to embark upon several major art house projects that are closer to her dramatic tastes. One of those was *The Favourite*, the 2019 historical drama directed by Yorgos Lanthimos. Stone plays Abigail, the newly hired chambermaid and cousin to the reigning British monarch, Queen Anne (Olivia Colman), who becomes entangled in a twisted menage-a-trois with the Queen and Rachel Weisz’s cunning Duchess of Marlborough.

When Lanthimos, previously best known for his controversial and disturbing films *Dogtooth* and *The Lobster*, wanted to cast Stone

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in his new project she was mildly apprehensive over working with the Greek auteur filmmaker.

“I had seen *Dogtooth* before meeting Yorgos in the summer of 2015 and when I sat down with him I was a bit scared wondering if he was as nuts as his movie!” Stone said, laughing.

“But then we had a really interesting conversation and he turned out to be so nice and normal. Obviously all his darkness comes out through his films.”

Their collaboration proved so rewarding that this September Stone will be seen starring in *Poor Things*, the latest film from Lanthimos and one of the most highly anticipated releases of the year. In the first trailer for the film, Stone, a natural redhead,

is looking distinctly Gothic and almost unrecognisable in long black tresses which are consistent with her character and the macabre aspects of the narrative.

Stone plays Belle Baxter, as a Frankenstein-like woman brought back to life by a deranged scientist (Willem Dafoe) who replaces her brain with that of her unborn child.

Having revelled in the artistic ambience that Lanthimos brought to *The Favourite*, Stone relished the chance to reunite with a director who encourages his actors to indulge their creative impulses. “Yorgos is incredibly visual, pretty quiet, but very funny,” said Stone.

“He doesn’t want to talk about character or motivation. He just wants you to discover it on your own, which I appreciate and really like because in life, we’re not sitting here thinking, ‘What’s your

Above: Mahershala Ali, Emma Stone, Viola Davis and Casey Affleck in the photo room at the Oscars in 2017

motivation? Why are you saying that to me?”

“Yorgos likes people to feel the process out and make it true for that moment. He doesn’t like to think about it ahead of time. He wants his actors to experience the words and the emotions unfolding while you’re in the very act of playing the scene.”

Poor Things is Stone’s first screen appearance since *Cruella* – the 2021 Disney film – and her first job since marrying SNL director Dave McCary and giving birth to their daughter Louise in March 2021.

Interestingly, Stone also found time to shoot another film back-to-back with Lanthimos last year. Entitled *And*, the cast includes her *Poor Things* co-star Dafoe, alongside Jesse Plemons, Hunter Schafer, and Margaret Qualley. The film is expected to be released in 2024.

Stone is currently primed to begin work on *Cruella 2* later this summer. According to informed speculation from the Hollywood trade papers, ➤



the project could earn her a \$50 million payday from a career-high base salary of \$10 million and a possible \$40 million back-end return depending on the film's final box-office totals.

The ability to play in an exotic art house project like *Poor Things*, big budget studio fare like *La La Land* and the *Cruella* films – not to mention two Woody Allen films (*Magic in the Moonlight* and *Irrational Man*) – is the kind of artistic space that Stone has wanted to occupy since she was a child growing up in Arizona.

“I never imagined any other life for me. I grew up wanting to make movies similar to those I loved watching so much. I lived in a very hot place (Arizona) and because the sun was so strong and I had such light skin I had to stay inside a lot of the time.

“And as a child I discovered that film was this parallel world into which I could dive into. I still remember all the film comedies I would watch on TV with my



father. That’s how I started to watch movies all the time and want to be part of that world.

“And it’s been such an incredible joy for me to have been able to work as much as I have and fulfill that dream.”

Acting also played a pivotal role in Stone’s psychological well-being in her formative years; offering a calming, therapeutic impact; better-protecting her against panic attacks. “I was an introverted and sensitive

it out instead of turning it inward. Acting is therapy, especially as a kid, and it was nice to have an outlet like that when I struggled with panic attacks. Being on stage early on made me less afraid to try things that are challenging and scary... Acting is a kind of suspension of everything else that is happening.

Ironically, her sensitivity and vulnerability are the very qualities that have allowed her to channel those qualities in her work and perform at the highest level. She grew feeling like an “outsider,” and in the end, her accomplishments have set her apart as an outlier.

“I’m a very vulnerable person. It’s easy for me to feel hurt. But that’s also what enables me to be very expressive and hopefully convey deep emotions as truthfully as possible. I have a pretty good sense of humour about myself even if I can be very self-critical at times. But that’s how I push myself to deliver the best work I’m capable of giving.” ■

Top: Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling at the TCL Chinese Theater in L.A. Above: Stone at the 2017 US Open tennis women’s final in New York

child and the theater allowed me to live in a world of my own. Performing on stage relieved me of my stress and doubts – it was the one place where I felt completely safe and happy.

“It helped me channel my energy somewhere else, to put