

# The Cuban ballerina

Rags to riches tales are often inspirational, writes *Harold von Kursk*. And the life trajectory of Ana de Armas is one beautiful illustration – from a Cuban fishing community to Hollywood and beyond. Next stop; *Ballerina* with Keanu Reeves

Ana de Armas grew up in impoverished circumstances in a remote coastal fishing community in Cuba that had no internet, no cell phone service, and no connection to the outside world.

At the age of nine, fate intervened when her family relocated to the capital city of Havana to act as caretakers for her recently widowed grandfather. Suddenly de Armas was exposed to a much larger world that would stoke her ambitions. “As a child, I relied on my imagination to have fun. No one in the beach town had a video game. I never had a VHS video player. I just knew that I wanted to be seen by people and do something bigger with my life,” said de Armas.

“As soon as I moved to Havana I started taking theatre classes. When I was growing up, I saw American actors on TV – Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts and Richard Gere. Their movies were so far from my reality that they were like fictional beings – but I dreamed that one day I would become a Hollywood actor like them.”

De Armas got her wish. Today she is one of the most sought-after actresses in the film industry following her Oscar-nominated turn as Marilyn Monroe in last year’s *Blonde*. That performance confirmed the promise she had

shown in her previous films – *The Gray Man*, *Deep Water*, and most memorably in *Knives Out*, the low-budget 2019 murder mystery that earned a massive \$300 million at the box office. In between, she made a scene-stealing and all-too-brief appearance as “Paloma” in *No Time to Die*, Daniel Craig’s final turn as James Bond. De Armas also co-starred with Craig in *Knives Out*, and the British actor is effusive in his praise of her acting prowess: “The performance she gives [in *Knives Out*] is remarkable, and amidst all the chaos of the scene-chewing and all that’s going on in the movie, she has this consistency – and she’s very funny because of it. She’s the heart and soul of it, and it’s a real achievement. The scenes with her and (co-star) Christopher Plummer are heartbreaking. They’re beautiful... and a testament to her skills as an actor.”

“She’s got the chops. She can do it all. And it’s about time people sat up and noticed,” said Craig, who pushed director Cary Fukunaga and Bond film producer Barbara Broccoli to cast her in *No Time to Die* even though the character she would eventually play had yet to be written into the screenplay.

This coming summer audiences will see the 35-year-old Cuban sensation starring in

*Ballerina*, the highly anticipated spin-off of Keanu Reeves’ highly entertaining, ultra-violent John Wick film franchise.

Shot over five months in Prague, the action thriller follows de Armas’s female assassin Rooney who exacts revenge on those who killed her family. During the course of filming, de Armas was able to renew her friendship with Reeves after first having worked with him on the 2015 crime thriller *Knock Knock*. “I love the John Wick universe and I loved working with Keanu again. It’s a great character and it’s a great story, it’s beautiful on screen. I’m very excited about [*Ballerina*]. Shooting it was really demanding – it’s on another level,” observed de Armas.

She admits that working on *Ballerina* left her battered, bruised, and sore – “my body, back – everything hurt.”

Yet the prospect of re-connecting with Reeves and engaging in some spirited hand-to-hand combat sequences with Reeves was too much to resist.

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**ANA DE ARMAS**

“I like the physical aspect and the choreography that comes with these kinds of roles. After the Bond movie came out, I received a lot of offers to work on action movies, but this was the only one that I really wanted to do because of Keanu,” explained de Armas.

She also recalled how she was so impressed by Reeves’ dedication to the complex combat and stunt work they had to do together that she decided to simply ignore the gruelling nature of the work and get on with the job: “I was like – I can’t complain anymore, I’m done. Because he is doing it!”

De Armas is not intent on becoming the world’s next great female action star, however. Despite the seeming mastery of martial arts and special skills she has displayed in her recent films, she confesses to lacking a natural affinity for the genre and is focused on pursuing more serious dramatic roles in the years ahead.

Apart from learning the ropes in the film industry, de Armas is also battle-tested on the celebrity dating front. After she and co-star Ben Affleck finishing shooting the Netflix thriller *Deep Water* at the end of 2019, they entered into a short-term affair that saw her post several romantic photos of them hiking in the desert, visiting her family in Cuba, and otherwise becoming Hollywood’s latest “It” couple. ➤







Ultimately their romance fizzled out after only ten months, and today de Armas is living in New York City with Tinder executive Paul Boukadakis whom she first began seeing in 2021. De Armas has since kept their relationship under tight wraps after having been exposed to what she described as a “horrible” level of media scrutiny of her every move with Affleck. She did however say that becoming a paparazzi target did have one positive benefit – de Armas now “loves” her decision to trade life in L.A. for that in New York.

Her work in last year’s Netflix production of *Blonde* served notice that de Armas is Was talented as she is beautiful.

De Armas believes that her Cuban background and lack

of familiarity with much of the conventional thinking about Monroe helped her to approach the role far more objectively than would otherwise have been the case. “This was also the first time I had to prepare for something so specific, play someone so well-known and one of the most photographed people in the world. I looked through all the books, the movies, the theories about her death and it took me forever. And then of course I had to work on the accent, the voice. It was a lot of work... but [*Blonde*] is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever done.”

During her time at the National Theatre School in

Havana, de Armas managed to find time to play in three feature films before deciding that it was time to expand her acting horizons by seeking fame and fortune in Spain. Taking advantage of her family’s ancestral ties to that country, de Armas was permitted by the Castro regime to leave the island prison and move to Madrid where she arrived with \$300 in her pocket, an amount she hoped would be enough for her to live on for a few months.

Fortunately, she quickly found work in TV shows and would spend the next eight years plying her trade mainly in low budget Spanish film productions: “I grew a lot after arriving in Spain. I did all the interesting things that I found there, but at some point, I wanted more again. So, I decided to move to the States. I didn’t speak English, so that was another challenge that I faced, and I knew I had to learn the language as fast as possible.”

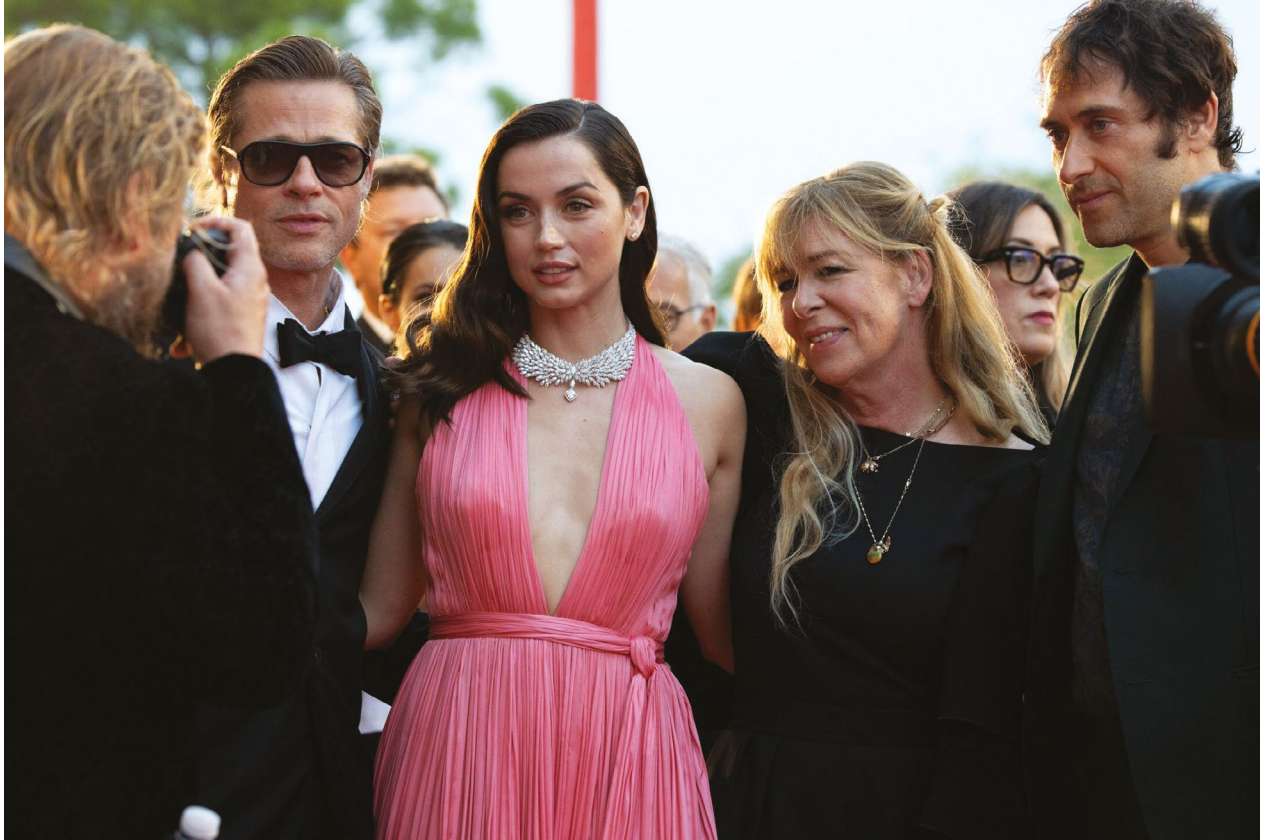
Her move to Hollywood came after she played the wife of Panamanian boxing champion Roberto Duran in the 2016 film, *Hands of Stone*, co-starring Edgar Ramirez, the Venezuelan actor who was similarly trying to make his mark in Hollywood and the U.S. film industry. ➤

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**Above: Ana de Armas with friend Edgar Ramirez in 2016**





They became friends and Ramirez (*Point Break*, *The Girl on the Train*) helped her land an American agent and manager who began lining up auditions for her even though she could barely speak the English language. “I knew that it would be hard at the beginning but I was very determined,” recalled de Armas.

“The biggest problem was the casting directors who weren’t very friendly or encouraging. One told me that I should come back in a few years when I had learnt to speak English. But I began taking English classes immediately and watched as many English movies and TV shows as I could... After a few months, I was able to get auditions even though at some castings I only understood maybe half of what people were saying to me!”

Her big break came in the form of a chance meeting outside the offices of CAA, one of the major Hollywood talent agencies.

**Above: De Armas with Brad Pitt at the *Blonde* premiere in Venice in 2022**

**Right: With a fan**

Producer Colleen Camp was struck by her abundant natural beauty and approached her about a role in *Knock Knock*, an upcoming movie with none other than Keanu Reeves.

De Armas explained that she was on the way to the airport, but Camp was undeterred and arranged a crash meeting with the film’s director, Eli Roth, who met her at a nearby café while

de Armas had her suitcase by her side. Not only did she make her flight, but she landed the role as well. “My English was still pretty bad, but I managed to get through the film by learning most of my lines phonetically and somehow that worked,” laughed de Armas.

“I’m aware of how lucky I’ve been and how many opportunities I’ve been given.

It’s crazy... If I think about it, it was a very big chance that I took in my life but I was taught by my parents to follow my dreams.

“My attitude is that in life you need to throw yourself into things if you want to succeed. You need to take chances but also be smart about how you proceed. My father’s advice was: Look far ahead, but take small steps!”

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