



The second act

Spider-Man and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* actress Kirsten Dunst continues to forge an incredible career as one of the most talented stars of a generation – from *Fargo* and *Beguiled*, to *The Power of the Dog*, writes Harold von Kursk

Kirsten Dunst is enjoying a highly satisfying Hollywood renaissance that began with her Emmy-nominated work in the FX anthology series *Fargo* in 2015, gained momentum with Sofia Coppola's *Beguiled* (2017), and soared with arguably the defining role of her career in Jane Campion's *The Power of the Dog* (2021). The latter film earned her an Oscar nomination – her first – for best actress and reflected her desire to test the limits. "There's a freedom that goes hand in hand with becoming a mother. I have a husband, I have two kids, and you don't give a damn what other people think of you. You feel braver," says Dunst.

"I probably wouldn't have been able to take on a character like that (Rose, a rancher's wife in *The Power of the Dog*, tormented by her deranged brother-in-law played by Benedict Cumberbatch) had I not reached a point where I have stopped caring what others might think of which roles I choose to play... But it took a long time to get here."

Soon to turn 43 years of age, Dunst and her *The Power of the*

Left: 69th Cannes Film Festival Jury member Kirsten Dunst attends *The Neon Demon* Premiere in 2016

Dog co-star Jesse Plemons (who plays her feckless husband) first met and fell in love while working together on *Fargo* in 2015 and later married in Jamaica in 2022. Today they live on a sprawling ranch house in California's San Fernando Valley together with their two children, Ennis, 6, and James, 3.

Plemons also makes a brief appearance in thriller *Civil War*, directed by Alex Garland (*Ex Machina* and *Devs*) and released early in 2024. Dunst stars as a photojournalist caught up amid armed conflict between left and right factions in a dystopian America that serves as a potent metaphor for the level of polarisation in U.S. society today. "Jesse and I decided that we wouldn't speak to each other the week he was on the set shooting *Civil War*," Dunst revealed.

"He was playing such a disturbing character (a murderous militia fighter) that it was better for him to just stay in his own space.

"The film was intense for everyone who worked on it because it's kind of a cautionary tale about what can happen in a bitterly divided society and the horrors of civil war. The only way I could relax was to spend each night with my kids and I would

read my lines for the next day's scenes while my younger son was curled up next to me in bed. That made it much easier to not take too much of my character home."

After making her acting debut aged six in Woody Allen's *Oedipus Wrecks* (1989) – one of three shorts in the anthology movie *New York Stories* – her screen breakthrough came in Neil Jordan's *Interview with a Vampire* (1995). Although she was only 11 at the time, Dunst was obliged to kiss her then 31-year-old co-star Brad Pitt in one of the film's most memorable scenes. Although she described the moment as "gross," it was a pivotal moment in her career that led her to be cast by Sofia Coppola in *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), the critically-acclaimed film that saw Dunst demonstrate astonishing emotional depth and sensitivity as a doomed suburban Lolita. But that was merely a prelude to winning the coveted role of Mary Jane in *Spider-Man* (2002)

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opposite Tobey Maguire in the title role, the first of three such blockbuster films that set in motion Hollywood's obsession with the comic book/superhero genre. "I wanted to be in that movie so badly," Dunst recalled.

"I loved it, and I wish we could have made a fourth. I think those were some of the best films of that kind – they really had an impact on audiences because of how deeply the romance between our characters (Mary Jane and Peter Parker/aka Spider Man) was developed."

Those massively popular tentpole productions gave Dunst the kind of financial security that enabled her to eventually embark down the road of independent films other edgier material. Dunst evolved from roles in big budget romantic fare, such as *Wimbledon* and *Elizabethtown*, to dark dramas like *All Good Things* (opposite Ryan Gosling) and Danish director Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*.

Her work in the film garnered her the prestigious Palme d'Or as best actress at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival, despite the fact that von Trier – noted for sexually explicit and violent films such as *Breaking the Waves* and *Antichrist* – was banned from the festival after making joking references to his admiration for Hitler. "I wasn't afraid of working with Lars even though he is a very controversial figure and the film has many dark elements to it," Dunst explained. Having checked herself into a rehab facility while dealing with a bout of depression in 2008, Dunst identified with her character Justine whose seemingly joyous marriage to Michael ►



(Alexander Skarsgård) is in fact a mask for her underlying despair and doubt. Dunst instinctively understood the twisted components of the human psyche that von Trier was attempting to explore in the story. Her character fears that her world is falling apart, a realisation that is overshadowed by the impending destruction of the Earth by a planet headed towards it on a collision course. "Lars spoke to me in a very moving and vulnerable way about his own battles with depression, something I've had to deal with in my own life. I saw this film as

Above: Dunst at the World Premiere of *Civil War* at The Paramount Theatre during the South by Southwest (SXSW) Film Festival in Austin, Texas, last year

a great opportunity and challenge to play a character who also has to face up to a lot of challenges in life. It took me time, but I learned to like myself more and not be dragged down by a lot of self-doubt and anxiety... I saw *Melancholia* as a breakthrough for me on many levels."

Fargo, a loose TV adaptation of the original 1996 Coen Bros. film, was another turning point in Dunst's life on both a professional and personal level. Her work on the series earned both rave reviews as well as an Emmy nomination (for best lead actress in a limited series or movie). The series marked a sensational return to grace for the then 30-year-old actress whose career was in the doldrums after a succession of box-office flops (*Bachelorette*, *On the Road*, *Two Faces of January*).

But even more importantly perhaps for Dunst was meeting and falling in love with co-star Jesse Plemons on the freezing Calgary, Alberta, set, where *Fargo* was being shot. "Jesse and I worked really hard together and we just kind of jived immediately. Working on *Fargo* felt so fun and special. I felt it was the most transformative thing that I'd ever done... it was kind of a creative awakening for me.

"The first thing that brought us together was how much we enjoyed working together

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and being part of that creative experience, which then evolved into friendship and something more over time until we became engaged a year later."

For Dunst, playing Peggy Blomquist in *Fargo* helped restore her enthusiasm for acting after she began to despair of ever finding a good role again.

"It's a completely unique character and one of the best parts I've ever played, or been able to play. It's a cliché to say, but they just don't write parts like this for women very often. That's why it stands out," said Dunst.

"I'm very lucky. I got very lucky, to be honest. I had auditioned for another great part just before that I didn't get. But then I got *Fargo*. I think that some things are meant to be. The series arrived at a time in my life when I was very depressed about ▶



the kinds of roles that were out there for me to play. I feel very fortunate that I got to play such a wonderful character.”

Dunst is the daughter of German father, Klaus, and Swedish-German mother, Inez. Born and raised in New Jersey, in 1993, Dunst and her younger brother Christian moved from New Jersey to Los Angeles with their parents, who separated two years later, so that Kirsten could better pursue her acting fortunes.

Though many child stars lead unhappy or distorted lives, Dunst is fairly sanguine about her childhood and teenage years. “I loved my time in New Jersey. I had a big imagination

Above: Dunst at Cannes for the *Loving* premiere Top right: with Michael Shannon, Jaeden-Lieberher and Joel Edgerton at the *Midnight Special* press conference Right: Walk of Fame

and I was always inventing these wild stories with my Barbie dolls. I was pretty carefree although my father who grew up in Hamburg would try to teach me to have a very strict work ethic. He was always pushing me to do my best and when I would get an A-minus on a course he would ask me why I wasn’t able to get an A-plus. But deep down he was a very good father and he was very supportive of me,” recalled Dunst.

“My mother and I have always been very close and whenever I would go on a film set she would be there with me the whole time and made sure I was feeling good and happy and not too stressed — she was the best! She’s also very excitable and I think I get my acting talent from her.”

Dunst is also glad that the kind of social media spotlight that falls on young actors today did not exist when she was making her mark in the film business.



“I was lucky that when I was a teenager there was a lot less media attention on celebrities than there is now and your entire life is being splashed on social media. It’s hard for young people in general today and young actors are constantly being followed by paparazzi and every move and every relationship is under intense scrutiny. I never really had to deal with that until I was much older,” said Dunst.

“What also helped me was that I was never impressed with the glamour of the film business. I avoided attracting attention to myself and tried to lead as normal a life as possible.”

As the mother of two young children, Dunst is experiencing the comfort and joy that comes with family life. She does admit however that being able to leave the house and work on a film set does provide some intermittent relief from the daily stresses of parenting. “Jesse says I’m a great mother, so that’s all I care about,” smiled Dunst.

“But it can also be exhausting. It feels like *Groundhog Day*: You’re in a robe all day, and you never have time to do anything for yourself. That’s why I was so excited [to go back to work after a year off] on

Civil War... I like being pampered on a set! [Dunst laughs]”

She also admits that motherhood has allowed her to become “less self-absorbed” and enabled her to refocus energies outwards.

“You stop worrying about unimportant things. You don’t care anymore about what people think about you or what is written about you. I’ve enjoyed the kind of close-knit family that we’ve created for ourselves and just how taking care of your children keeps you grounded and focused.

“And what’s been so great about being with Jesse is such a good soul — those are qualities that show up in his performances. I love that he’s very down-to-earth... He’s one of the kindest people I’ve ever known. I’m very lucky.” ■

