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Catherine Deneuve: politics, plastic surgery and her new film *Je Veux Voir*

The French beauty talks of her role in a new film as an actress visiting wartorn Lebanon and travelling with a Lebanese driver



Alan Franks

Even before she arrives at the Paris office where our conversation is to take place, it is as if she is there already. In a sense she is. Reputations do go before their owners, and hers is a whopper. There is none bigger in France. This virtual presence of hers fills the place with silent fear. It goes up and down the corridor in the form of beautiful young agency workers, each one of them with a phone held hard against their ear, locked into a call of unimaginable importance. You can almost feel the character attributed to her, one of cryptic iciness, testing out the ground.

The tension is broken only when she comes in through the front door and looks around. This happens in a rather comic way, because she looks so very ordinary. She's in good shape all right, and although she doesn't much like talking about all that, there's no way you can meet Catherine Deneuve and ignore the subject of her appearance. It would be like meeting Carla Bruni and never mentioning her husband. For decades Deneuve, now 65 and with more than a hundred film appearances to her name, was Yves St Laurent's most exotic clothes horse, and she still wears his stuff. Today a brown jump suit, which was the only thing she felt cool enough in on this blazing autumn day.

We go into a room with a big "*Ne pas déranger*" sign on the door. It's all a bit awkward to begin with. There's a big noise of traffic coming up from the Avenue Rapp, just south of the Seine by Pont de l'Alma. I ask for the windows to be closed so that we can hear ourselves speak. She doesn't object, but she doesn't seem particularly happy either, and I can't work out why. It's only after we've sat down either side of a big formal table that the explanation emerges from her handbag (Fendi) in the form of a cigarette packet (Philip Morris). She just about chain-smokes while we talk, so that when we're done, the big windows are immediately flung open to de-fug the room.

If she had been as bad as her word, this would have been a short conversation, which she starts by saying she will not discuss anything except her new film, *Je Veux Voir*, about an actress visiting wartorn Lebanon and travelling south with a Lebanese driver towards the Israeli border.

That would have meant nothing about the enormous effects of her early stardom, beginning in 1964 with Jacques Demy's musical, *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, going on with Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* the following year and Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* in 1967; her relationships, and children, with the directors Roger Vadim and Marcello

Mastroianni; her marriage to the British photographer David Bailey; her political involvements, which she misleadingly downplays; her long life in the public eye.

In the end she does cover these subjects, and more besides. As she unwinds, she also talks illuminatingly of her terror of scrutiny. This, she says, is so strong that it has prevented her from even contemplating an appearance on the live stage. It surely explains that peculiar aura of fear around her. This degree of fame may indeed intimidate, yet when you talk to her close-up you realise that you are not looking at the perpetrator but the victim. She practically says as much: "To be the centre of attraction is something I have a lot of problems with. The idea of being on a stage with people looking only at me terrifies me. On a film set it is very different. Everyone there, perhaps 25 or 30 people, they are all working, all involved in whatever they are doing. Whereas in the theatre you rehearse and rehearse and rehearse and then you present this thing which is completely finished, and in front of you."

She tails off here and her face quails, as if she is glimpsing a vista of plush theatrical stalls with people in them, and finding it too much to bear. Then she smiles at herself, seeming to agree that it's a rum business. As the smiles increase, something strange happens to her features. The strangeness is that there is nothing strange in their animation. The *froideur*, the *hauteur* (sometimes only French words do the trick) that you see in her housewife prostitute of *Belle de Jour* or her glacial psycho of *Repulsion* are gone. Suddenly it's hard to imagine how they ever occupied the space.

There is none of the weird, paralysed sheen or leveraged pout of the Botox survivor. When we are talking of her role as a fashion model, and we reach the face, she confirms that she has never had any work done on it, while many of her age have. "I haven't had the time," she jokes. Then she adds: "If you want an explanation, you would have to meet my mother. She is 98. It's genetic."

Try as you might to dodge the over-familiar word icon, it grabs you by the shoulders and stares you in the face. One strong reason for this is that for four years in the 1980s Deneuve's image was used to represent Marianne, the French national symbol, and so she appeared on the country's currency. Even now, when she is old enough to be the grandmother of those early roles, she knows the enduring potency of her image. She has just put it to intriguing use in *Je Veux Voir*.

The actress in the film is called Catherine Deneuve and she is filmed talking ad lib to her companion, played by Rabih Mroué, as they make their way through a dangerous landscape of ruined towns and heroic reconstruction. She was approached by its co-directors Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige and agreed immediately, although the conditions were rough and the budget tiny. "It is as the title says," she explains. "*Je veux voir*. I want to see."

The result is a peculiar hybrid of documentary and improvised fiction. It is also very revealing about her, whether that was the intention or not. At the end we find her attending a gala dinner, which is supposedly her more natural habitat. She is the centre of attention, assailed by well-meant compliments on her beauty. It is only when her eyes meet those of Rabih, plain unknown Rabih, that she finally gives the kind of smile that I have been trying to describe.

Deneuve insists she is not motivated by political aims but rather by individual causes. *Je Veux Voir* may be consistent with that approach, but when you also consider the other causes she has espoused over the years, they amount to a portfolio that looks pretty *engagé*. To name but a few: Amnesty International's campaign to abolish the death penalty; Voix de Femmes pour la Démocratie (Voice of Women for Democracy); the 1971 Manifeste des 343 Salopes (Manifesto of the 343 Sluts), in favour of the legalisation of abortion.

More recently she was one of 8,000 signatories on a petition complaining against the allegedly misogynistic treatment of Ségolène Royal, the socialist presidential candidate in 2007. "I think many found it difficult to accept the fact that a woman woman wanted to be elected president," she says with a mixture of resignation and disapproval. "But then they still have difficulty admitting that a woman could direct a company, or a group of men."

Is she thinking of France? "Everywhere. Although maybe a little less in America."

It happened in Britain. "Ah yes but I would not have supported Mrs Thatcher. She was tough and hard. Ségolène Royal was different." And she gave Sarkozy a close race, didn't she? "That's what the polls said, yes. Close, but not close enough. She was not very good in the last TV encounter she had with him."

Was this a matter of her presentation, her performance? "Well, I hope it is more than a performance. TV is a

terrible mirror. It makes things look closer and bigger than they are. I don't think it was that she was no good as a performer, but that all of a sudden she seemed to represent a lot of the defects for which women are reproached. The level of debate was not high. I was so sad."

She says that some become offended, even aggressive, when people in her situation refuse to comply with the image that has been constructed. Although she does not quite know what the public perception of her is, she acknowledges that her profile has changed. "When I signed that [1971] petition, I was not officially a feminist. Yet I have always been one. I was from a family of four sisters." One of these, the actress Françoise Dorléac died in a car crash in 1967. "But I am not political in the same way as Marguerite Duras [the writer] or Simone Signoret [the actress] were. I refused to belong to a political group. But it [the abortion issue] did become political because people were going on trial, and what they had been doing was pursuing love."

She sees Sarkozy's France as a continuation of the trend these past 30 years, in which the population wants a president of one political complexion but with a government comprising made up of representatives of a different one. "The French are like that. Always the middle. A president of the left but with right-wing people under him, or the other way around. We called it cohabitation."

In the politics of love she is a renowned veteran. Of her previous partners, it is not Vadim or Mastroianni that she chooses to talk, but David Bailey. When I ask if those two directors encouraged their respective children with her, Christian and Chiara, to follow her into the acting profession, she says quite brusquely: "No. It was their own decision. They didn't really ask me either. You always try to protect your own children. You think you know how it is [in your working life], and you would like them to avoid the difficulties. But that is something you cannot do, because their story is not my story."

After our conversation I look back through some old, flaking press cuttings. There she is, cool as anything, amply justifying one film writer's description of her "forever hinting at intimations of depravity". It is 1965, and her romance with Bailey has blossomed among the Paris fashion collections. He's 27 and looking sultrily back at her. "She's all woman," he tells the reporter, "but temperamental as hell, like a Ferrari. She's going to be a very difficult bird to run."

Deneuve has got someone else these days — a good strong relationship, she says, without divulging his identity. "It's not a secret," she goes on. "But it's nobody you know. Nobody in the business." She prefers to talk of Bailey. "I haven't seen him for a long time. He's a difficult man to catch, you know. He's never there. He is quite a personality and he always has been. He is not taken in by fashion and things of the moment. I have always been attracted to the person not so much for what they had done but for what they were.

When I say that Bailey still does work for this newspaper group, she lights up (not a cigarette this time) and says: "Well, if you see Bai-lee you tell him to come to Paris and see me." And that's about as regal as she gets. Then the windows are flung open again. She says she once gave up smoking for 11 years and doesn't feel great about having gone back to it. But, she adds in her defence, she was working out this morning. A very French cohabitation: one the one hand the fags, on the other the gym. With an unofficial queen like this one, the republic's in good hands.

Je Veux Voir is out now

Deneuve's career

1943 Catherine Deneuve is born on October 22 in Paris. Both parents are actors; Maurice Teynac and Renée Deneuve.

1956 Makes her movie debut at the age of 13 in the film *Les Collégiennes*.

1964 The birth of her son, Christian Vadim, to Director Roger Vadim.

1964 Breakthrough performance in the Jacques Demy musical, *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*.

1965 Plays the archetypal character "Ice maiden" in Roman Polanski's *Repulsion*. Marries David Bailey.

1967 Seals her reputation with the lead in Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour*. Her sister is killed in a car crash.

1972 Divorces Bailey and has second child, Chiara Mastroianni, with Marcello Mastroianni (*La Dolce Vita*) 1981

Wins her first César award (Best Actress) for her role in Francois Truffaut's *Le Dernier Métro*.

1983 Appears in *The Hunger* alongside Susan Sarandon and David Bowie.

1993 Second César award for her role in Régis Wargnier's *Indochine*. Also nominated for an Academy Award.

2001 Chosen as the face of L'Oréal Elève.

2008 *A Christmas Tale (Un Conte de Noël)*, by Arnaud Desplechin, is shown at Cannes. Deneuve appears as the matriarch.

Nicholas Katz

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