

EXCLUSIVE

# Catherine the Great

Catherine Zeta-Jones is the epitome of  
class, style, and all that jazz

WORDS BY VANESSA PASCALE • PHOTO CREDIT: JOHN RUSSO



**I**t's late November, and I am waiting for Catherine Zeta-Jones in a room inside Facebook's New York City headquarters when I realize that I am a tad nervous to meet the illustrious actress. A bonafide star, Catherine's acting credits run the gamut, from romantic comedies and dramas to thrillers and musicals. She sings, dances, *and* acts (hello, triple threat!). And she's Hollywood Royalty: the wife of Michael Douglas, the daughter-in-law of Kirk Douglas. Add to that the fact that she often portrays unapologetically bold women, whose piercing stare would cause anyone to recoil in fear (remember when she stabbed the table with a raw steak in *No Reservations*?!). So, can you really blame me for feeling *slightly* intimidated?

The door opens, interrupting my thoughts. As I enter the next room, I am greeted with a jubilant, "C'mon in!" from Catherine. Her Welsh accent surprises me as I've become so accustomed to the American accent she often uses on screen. While taking a quick bite, she warns me that it may smell foodie in here. Catherine is dressed in a floor-length, fuschia dress, and has her signature long, dark hair styled in waves. Over the years, she has been lauded as one of the most beautiful and sexiest actresses around—a title that, I can attest, continues to hold true.

As I sink into the banquettes beside Catherine, I inconspicuously breathe a sigh of relief —elated to find that she is as lovely as she is gorgeous. I immediately tell her that I love *Queen America* —her new web TV series on Facebook Watch. “Yay!” she says enthusiastically and claps her hands. In *Queen America*, Catherine plays Vicki Ellis, the ruthless Oklahoma beauty pageant coach helping the adorably clueless Samantha Cole win the Miss America title. Catherine describes Vicki as complicated. “Aren’t we all? Some of us are very good at hiding it better than others. I think we’re all insecure, I think we wouldn’t be women if we didn’t have the ability to have all those different elements within us. We’re strong. We’re vulnerable. I’m a lioness around my kids if anyone... set in a world of fake perfection that we have to live in and my kids get bombarded by it. When I was a kid, if I wanted to get body shamed, I’d have to go to a store and buy a magazine and look at a supermodel and go, *Mmm, I wish I looked like that*. Now, it’s every second of the day. And that’s not even real perfection. There’s no real perfection —a lot of it you can buy an app to correct.”

*Queen America* came along at the perfect time. Ultimately, Catherine was looking for a TV series that would allow her the time to really dive into a multifaceted character. “I was like, *THIS is it. I have to get my ass down to Atlanta, Georgia now!* I just felt that I could have a lot of fun with this woman, who on the surface looks like she’s ruthless...but as the series goes on, you find out it’s not all what you see, the river runs much deeper... And Meaghan Oppenheimer, our creator and writer, just found wonderful relationships within the whole piece, in a world that looks very stereotypical and could be stereotypical, she found very grounded characters and I just fell in love with it.”

Having grown up a competitive dancer, Catherine understands the pageant world, now, much more than ever. Born in Swansea in Wales, Catherine began her career in musical theatre at a young age. Even as a child, she did all that she could to grow and succeed in entertainment: working tirelessly on her craft and competing in talent shows that awarded her the money needed to get her to London. “I was 10 when I did *Annie* in the West End of London. I was 14 when I played Tallulah in *Bugsy Malone* in the West End. Then, I left school at 15 to be in *The Pajama Game* to get my work permit, and then I was in *42nd Street* for 3 years. And then, I decided to do film and television after that. So it’s all I’ve known, and I know how hard it can be and I know the sacrifices that I had to make to fulfill a dream.”

Her mastering of choreography, singing, dancing, and acting coupled with the discipline learned early on has helped her excel in a career that has called for her to

expertly wield a sword (*The Mask of Zorro*), adroitly and sexily slink through a laser security system (*Entrapment*), and sing and dance well enough to garner an Academy Award (*Chicago*). Time and time again, Catherine has demonstrated that her talent knows no bounds. All of her hard work has translated into an impressive portfolio of blockbuster hits and over fifty awards and nominations, including an Academy Award, a Tony, SAG awards, and two Golden Globe nominations.

And even though being an actor means dealing with a great deal of rejection, and myriad trials and tribulations, Catherine and Michael’s 18-year-old son, Dylan, and 15-year-old daughter, Carys, still want to follow in their parents’ footsteps. Dylan (who is currently in college and will likely major in history or politics) and Carys (who, at the time of our interview, had just landed the lead role in her high school play) have been honing their acting skills in drama camp every summer since they were kids.

“Michael and I look at them, and go, ‘Mmm, they’re just good.’ If they weren’t, we would so happily guide them in a different direction, y’know? We both had amazing careers and great lives. We met each other in this business. The reason why they’re born is because of this business... They understand that it’s not sunglasses and autographs. They know the work. They know how sad you can get —even at careers like Michael and I— if things don’t work out or how hard it is to get good things made... So, after all that, they still want to do that.” What sort of advice do you give them? “Well, do it! Because it’s very clear to me that it’s an inherent passion... I have my kids on a very long leash, so I’ve never told them that they couldn’t do anything, so I’m certainly not going to start now.”

A chameleon on screen, Catherine can just as easily portray a needy, diva, like in *America’s Sweethearts* as she can depict a cutthroat drug kingpin in *Cocaine Godmother*. I especially love her in *No Reservations*, where she plays a serious chef who takes in her niece, played by Abigail Breslin, after her sister is killed in a car accident. “A lot of people love *No Reservations*! It was kind of a little movie and it had legs. So many people saw it after it opened and go, ‘I love that movie.’ People just like food, but it’s a fun movie. Me too, I love that. One of my favorites, of course, *Chicago*, because I got the chance to do that on film. I love *Traffic*, I got to work with my husband, but I wasn’t in a scene with him. We got to promote a movie together —I was very fond of *Traffic*.”

Catherine would love to do more comedy, a genre she’s comfortable in when it’s written well. “I can’t even tell a joke, I forget the punchline. The idea of



doing stand-up comedy, for me, is probably a recurring nightmare that will never ever, ever go away. Acting comedically, I really enjoy. I loved working with Billy Crystal and Johnny Cusack in *America's Sweethearts*. We were cracking up all the time." She also relishes diving deep into her emotions and pushing herself further than she thought possible, which she can explore in dramatic roles. "I'm lucky that I started in theatre...I know what it means to do the same show for two years with different audiences, eight times a week. It's challenging and it's really, really rewarding. So, it's all one of the same really —finding the truth in the character."

Catherine is now at a point in her life where she'd rather stay home and sew than work with unsavory people. "This is not brain surgery...this is making entertainment, and I don't want to be around [that], and I have been in the past, early on in my career. People are just plain mean and make you sad. So, for me, now, I'm only working with great people who have no attitude and who want to work as hard as me to get it done and have no ego —that's it," she says matter-of-factly.

Her passion for sewing and home decor informed her latest venture: Casa Zeta-Jones. A self-proclaimed "frustrated interior designer and architect," Catherine has also been channeling her creative energy into decorating her homes and sewing curtains, a skill inherited from her mother and great-grandmother, who were seamstresses. "Basically it's like, *I don't want to take that job with those a-holes and those egomaniacs, what am I going to do?*" One day, while watching *Shark Tank* —as she always does— she thought, *Who would be my shark?* She concluded it would be FUBU founder Daymond John, so she phoned him with her proposition. Since the two had never spoken or met before, Daymond initially assumed she was calling to invite him to a party, she tells me. "Two years later, I have a brand and he's my business partner. It's a lot of work, but I just love it. It's like a hobby that went viral." Casa Zeta-Jones, which is available on QVC, boasts luxurious, vintage-inspired, home decor —bedding, pillows, rugs— as well as pretty pajama sets and robes.

Of all the rooms Catherine has decorated in her Bedford, New York mansion, her favorite is their cavernous, Moroccan-inspired family room — appointed with decadent fabrics and loads of pillows piled atop two huge Chinese daybeds. Perfect for entertaining, the room has a big big-screen TV, piano, and karaoke machine. "I lie in there on a Sunday and read a bit, nap a bit with one of my throws. When my house is full, with all my family from Wales and

Michael's family, my nieces and my nephews, we all congregate there before dinner and then after dinner."

This November, Catherine and Michael will celebrate their 19th wedding anniversary. The secret to their successful marriage, Catherine tells me, is being kind, tolerant, and forgiving of one another. "First of all, we spend so much time going, 'Thank you' to total strangers. 'Thank you so much. Oh, I appreciate it. You're so sweet.' And then you go home and are like, *Mehh!* to the person you love more than anything else in the world. So that's a bit of mantra for us. It's like, OK, leave that all out there, come in, and just be kind to each other. And he's my best friend, y'know? Through thick and thin. I lucked out, he's a very special person." What do you admire most about Michael? "He's a good citizen of the planet. A lot of egos in the acting world, and there's a lot of people we don't see outside their bubble in this world, but he looks outside the bubble. He's really concerned with what's going on out there. He's philanthropic. He's thoughtful. *Great* friend. He's loyal. His loyalty to other people and his loyalty to the planet and what's good, what's right —that's what I admire more than anything," she replies fondly.

Catherine truly believes that the two of them, who met at the 1998 Deauville Film Festival in France, were destined to be together. "I do believe in destiny. I probably would've met him at some film festival in my life, y'know? Look, all the odds seemed to be against us. *Ugh, it will never last* [all the naysayers said]. Well, it did," she says with a smile. She also believes in compatibility based off astrology —Catherine and Michael share the same birthday, September 25th. "25 years apart! People are starting to forget that. God damn men!" she quips with a smile. "Sometimes we look at each other and it's like we know, kinda, what the other is thinking. I totally believe in that. There is an alignment of where you are born and I don't know whether it's the date or...I don't know, but for sure." Their handwriting is even similar. "I've been in New York or he's been in L.A. working and we're both in different hotels and we're both having room service and we both order the same thing: beet salad and something. I just ordered beet salad. Really? Me too."

While the couple have tried to work together on screen, nothing has panned out yet. "It's always a bit weird when you're married to somebody, it takes the movie magic out of it, I think. They certainly don't want us kissing on screen. It's like, 'Eww, go home to do that. I'm not paying to see that!' The idea of us wanting to kill each other, like Kathleen Turner and him in *War of the Roses*, that makes sense. That's fun. People like that. They go, 'Oh my god, those guys are crazy together!'" **ML**

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### What film was the most challenging for you?

“Film? One I didn’t like, but I’m not going to say, just because people were mean to me on it. That was a long, long time ago and well forgotten. I think the challenging one physically had to be *Chicago* because of the workload or the dancing. It wasn’t like going on stage and doing it once, right? It was like three days of four different camera angles. So, the stamina of that. But the pure joy of it completely... I’d do it all over again. Oh my god...I loved it.”

### Any plans to do more theatre?

“I’m actually meeting a theatre director at my house on Saturday about something. It just has to be the right thing... And this particular piece I’m talking about would actually open in London, then come to Broadway —I’d be going home. But I have a 15-year-old daughter who doesn’t really want me to go away for 6 months. It’s a huge commitment for me because of my family. If I was single, oh yeah, I wouldn’t care. I’d be doing it straight away, but I have responsibilities... It all comes down to: What is it that’s so special that would make me do that...and commit to something so wholeheartedly? It has to be something good. So, we’ll see.”

### What do you think people would be surprised to find out about you?

“A lot like our show actually, is that people always think, ‘Oh, she’s just together, successful, and pretty...’ and I’m just a regular woman. I’ve got all the insecurities that every woman has. I’m just like you. I’m very down-to-earth. I’m a Welsh girl who happened to work really hard and make good. But I feel very humble that the work that I had to put in to get here. It was never handed to me. People think, ‘Oh, she swans around in kimonos and mules. She has her hair and makeup done every morning and every night.’ I really don’t. And I think that’s the beauty of how close I am to my family. We’re very, very close because we’re pretty real. And Kirk Douglas —Spartacus! We’re a regular family, so that’s it. I’m heading back to my family now.”

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