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Icon

MARION COTILLARD

She radiates Old Hollywood grace and of-the-moment international style, but as anyone who's watched her soul-baring performances can attest, France's most in-demand export is a true original. Fellow actress **Jessica Chastain** interviews

PHOTOGRAPHED BY **THOMAS WHITESIDE** STYLED BY **GRACE COBB**

It's nearly impossible to portray an icon. Film history is littered with failed biopics because even great actors struggle to capture the inexplicable spark that separates the merely great from the eternally unforgettable. But every once in a while, it happens: An actor captures that specific brilliance—and she becomes a legend too. That's what happened in 2007's *La Vie en Rose*, when a transformed Marion Cotillard embodied the grace, madness, and prickly resilience of Edith Piaf, singing *"Non, je ne regrette rien"* in her final scene with utter confidence, because Cotillard knew that she had left everything she had on the screen. The French star, born in Paris, raised by bohemian actor parents, and in a long-term relationship with French actor-director Guillaume Canet (who is directing her in this fall's *Blood Ties*, in which she'll star opposite Clive Owen), was already a rising star in Europe before her Oscar win captured the world's attention. Now 37, she is fast becoming her own sort of global icon, a modern-day Catherine Deneuve: drop-dead gorgeous, wildly talented, insanely stylish—only with a kind of throwback, Garbo-esque steeliness. Already she's gone toe-to-toe with Oscars' aisle-seat actors Johnny Depp, Daniel Day-Lewis, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Christian Bale. She consistently emerges as that rare actress who needn't trade her grace for power, who can play the vulnerable patient (*Rust and Bone*) or the lethal femme fatale (*Inception*, *The Dark Knight Rises*) with equal conviction. Next, Cotillard will burnish her fast-building legend with *The Immigrant*, as a Jazz Age woman pressed into prostitution and torn between two men (Joaquin Phoenix and Jeremy Renner). As she moves among European art films, blockbusters, and prestige indies, there are precious few actresses who can keep up with her. Here, she speaks to one who is also a friend and fan, Jessica Chastain.—*L.H.*

JESSICA CHASTAIN: Your parents were actors. When did you decide to become one?

MARION COTILLARD: There's not one moment, but I really felt this creativity around me from my parents.

JC: What was the first role that made you dig very deep within yourself?

MC: One of my first movies, *Pretty Things*. I was playing twin sisters. One of them would die, and the other would take her place. That was one of my first roles as a lead, the first time I had to explore a human soul. And actually, they were two souls! That was the first time I told myself that I could find the strength.

JC: Did it scare you when you realized that you actually had to go to those dark places?

MC: I was never scared—well, in *Public Enemies*, the Michael Mann movie, I thought it was impossible to lose entirely my French accent. And actually that *was* impossible!

JC: You were wonderful in that movie!

MC: Fortunately, she was half French.

JC: When you leave a character, like Edith Piaf, how long does it take you to lose her?

MC: Well, it depends. Before doing *La Vie en Rose*, I never thought I would have trouble leaving a character. I even had weird, bad judgment about actors who could not get out of a role. This was something that I didn't understand, but this was because I had never experienced the depth that I experienced with Piaf. I'm a little ashamed to say it, but it took me a long, long time to separate myself from her.

JC: How long?

MC: Eight months. Which is ridiculous, because I'm a really sane person, and everything I lived for those eight months sounded totally crazy. And I hated it.

JC: I understand. When you open your heart, mind, and soul, how can it not affect you?

MC: Her biggest fear was to be alone. One day, I realized that I was scared to leave her alone. Which sounds totally crazy.

JC: No, it doesn't!

MC: But I just wrapped a movie, and the character took three days to go away. I guess when you explore someone else's soul like we do, you always keep something. It's like love, I guess.

JC: We can't help but be changed and grow and evolve from the women that we play.

MC: I guess that's what we're looking for, too. When I was a kid, I started to have a lot of questions about human beings, and I was a troubled child because of all of these questions. I guess that's why I became an actress. Not only because my parents were actors and, yeah, it's a beautiful thing to tell stories, but I think I became an actress because I wanted to explore this—to explore what a human being is. In a way, it really helped me.

JC: When I watched you in *Rust and Bone* last year, I just burst into tears. I immediately felt this connection to this woman.

MC: The more I learn about acting, the more I get connected with my character—but through my character, I connect with people who could be like the character—with women. ●