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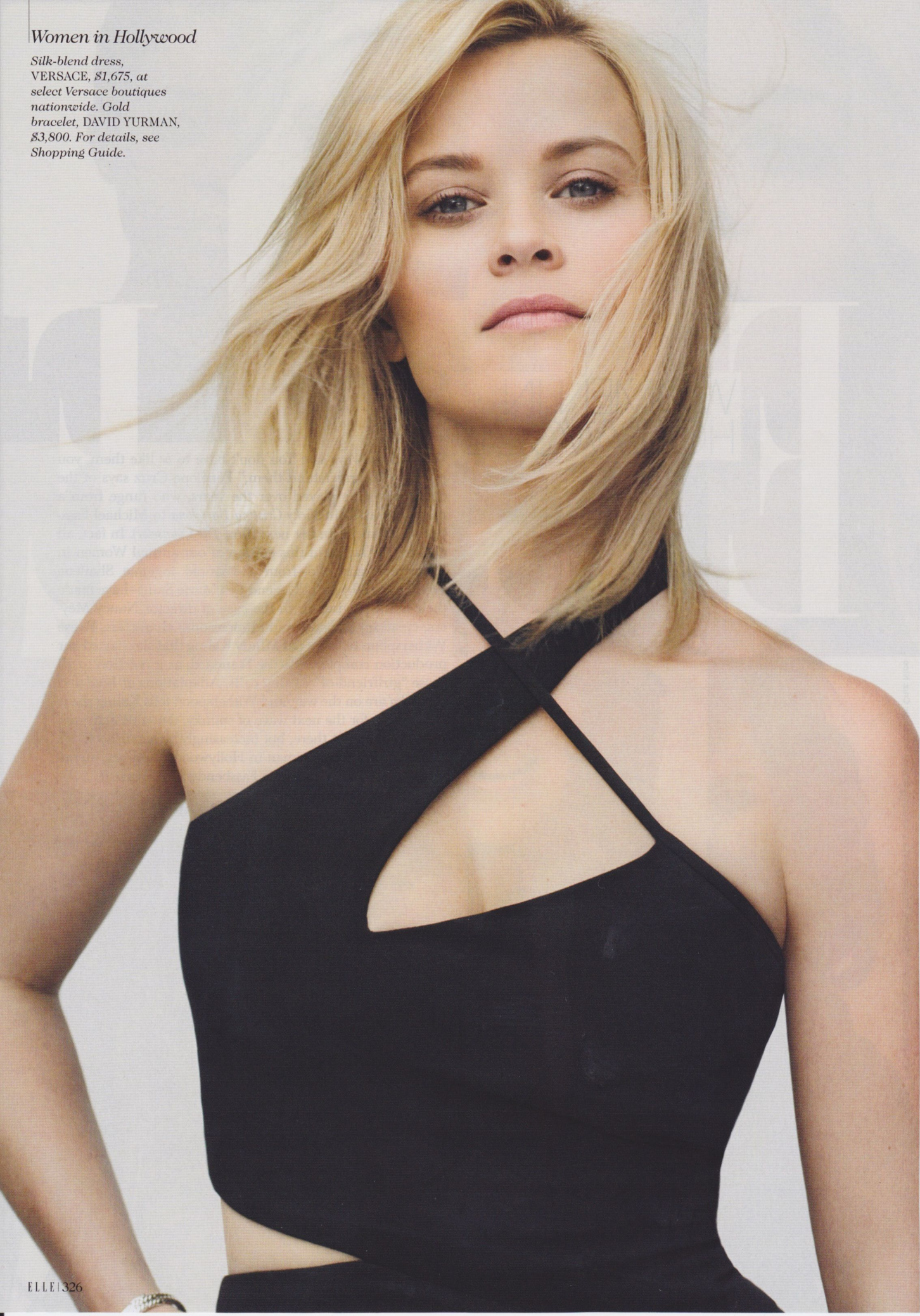
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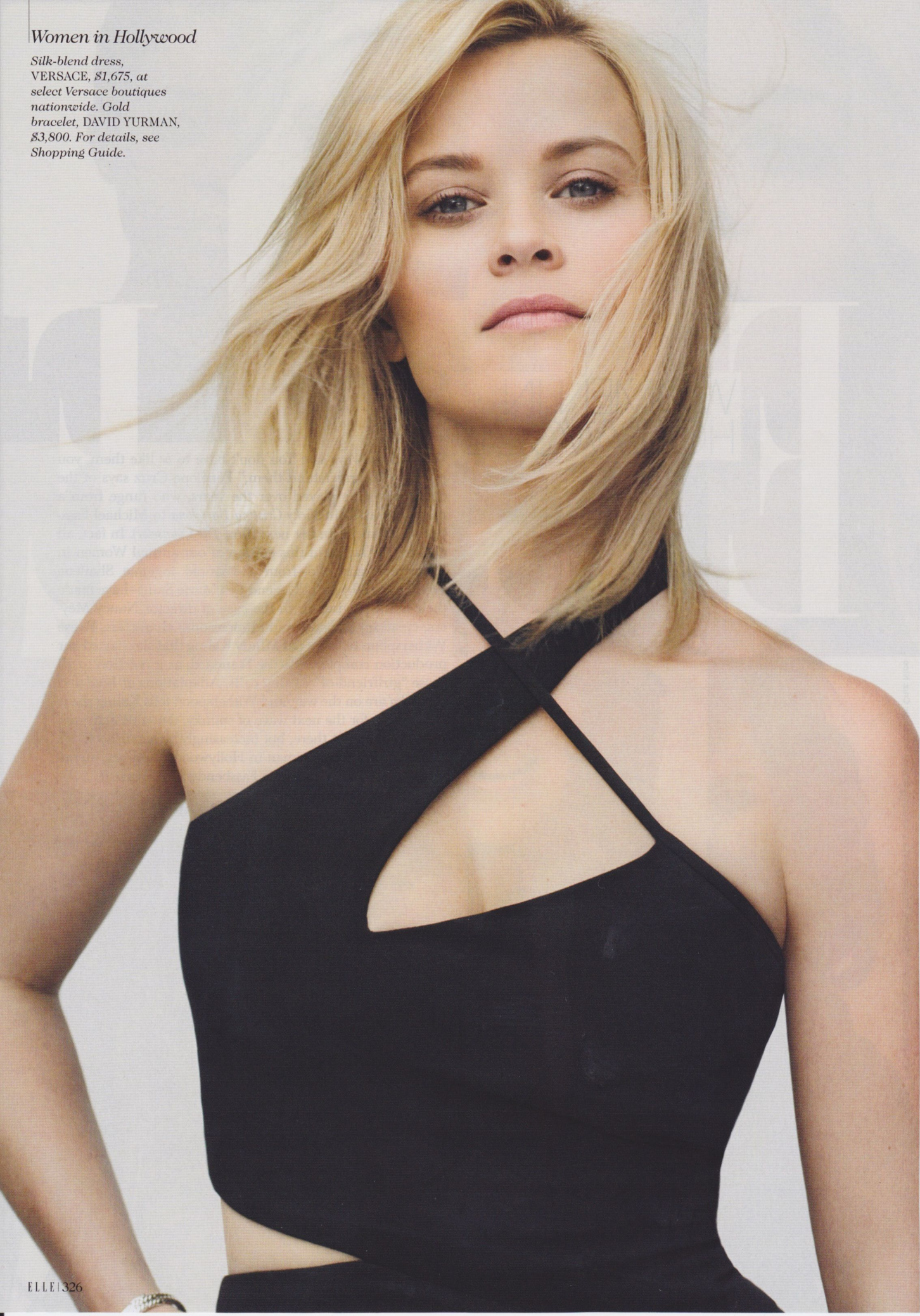
Women in Hollywood

Silk-blend dress,
VERSACE, \$1,675, at
select Versace boutiques
nationwide. Gold
bracelet, DAVID YURMAN,
\$3,800. For details, see
Shopping Guide.



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REESE WITHERSPOON

Never content to be just another pretty blond, she has made characters into icons and turned icons into people we feel we know. And instead of just complaining about the lack of strong roles for women, Witherspoon started her own production company. **Mindy Kaling** finds out what drives her work | PHOTOGRAPHED BY THOMAS WHITESIDE STYLED BY JOE ZEE

In retrospect, Reese Witherspoon's extraordinary evolution from spunky Southern child actor to assured Hollywood power player feels fated: Whether wielding a tomboy's burgeoning sex appeal in her coming-of-age film *Man in the Moon*, out-maneuvering the sadistic rich kids in *Cruel Intentions*, battling Broderick in *Election*, or painting law school hot pink in *Legally Blonde*, Witherspoon has long been drawn to young ambitious women who unabashedly attain power in chauvinist spaces and prove how a female character can triumph without surrendering her identity, femininity, or humor. But it's not just that the Tennessee-bred 37-year-old has become one of her generation's most relatable female stars or that she scored an Oscar and a Grammy for her emotionally raw turn as *Walk the Line*'s June Carter Cash; her Pacific Standard production company has a slate of high-profile female-centric films in the works. Here, she opens up to her friend—and fellow actress/producer/rom-com fanatic—Mindy Kaling—*Logan Hill*

MINDY KALING: Besides starring in movies, you're also a producer. I think people don't know that about you.

REESE WITHERSPOON: I started noticing a couple years ago that I wasn't seeing women as the stars of movies. I'm seeing them as the guys' girlfriends, or so-and-so's wife. I just thought: God, if I don't start buckling down and start producing some movies, what's my daughter going to see in the movies?

MK: Also, you never play the nagging, pretty, yoga-bodied girlfriend of the funny male lead.

RW: [Laughs] Because I don't have the yoga body! I don't know what made me say at 21, "I don't wanna play anybody's girlfriend! I wanna be the lead!" Look—you did it—what you don't see, you create.

MK: Otherwise, I'd just be going in every pilot season for the Indian-accented sister, or the nagging girlfriend.

RW: It's that courage to go, "No. I am awesome enough to star in my own show. I've got a perspective here, and I think it's just as valid as anyone else's." I think it's a great time to be a woman in movies and TV. Especially a funny woman. Ten years ago, it didn't seem possible. When I was really young, I had people say to me like, "Oh, you gained weight," in the middle of a movie. Five years ago, I had people say it to my face! "You're not gonna be funny in this movie, because girls aren't funny." People don't do that anymore. Women are tuning in.

MK: You're producing and starring in *Wild*, and I know you're producing *Gone Girl*.

RW: This goes back to finding great stuff for women. Gillian Flynn just writes these incredible, dynamic female characters. [*Gone Girl*] is the first situation where I'm producing something I'm not in and it's exciting. *Wild* was one of those books that just changed my life. It's the true story of this woman [Cheryl Strayed] who, after her mother died, ended up falling into an abyss of grief and decided she was going to hike from the Mojave desert all the way to Oregon by herself. You know, those moments in your life where you realize no one's ever going to save you, you have to save yourself? I think that's a huge idea. And it's really beautifully told. It's like *Into the Wild* for a woman. I mean, how often do we get to see a woman, out there versus nature, you know?

MK: And you've managed to have this career, win an Oscar, and you had a baby at 22.

RW: Somebody was saying to me the other day, "Oh, people get less interesting when they have kids." I just don't think that's true. I feel like I was so confused before I had kids, I almost got in my own way. Having kids made me clearer about who I was as a woman. I just wanted to exhibit good qualities for my daughter. I was a little competitive before I had kids—probably really competitive, to be totally honest. It really made me let go of that.

MK: Okay, who is the sexiest costar you've ever had? Like Michael Fassbender—have you worked with him?

RW: I haven't! What am I doing? Gosh, he's so talented.

MK: Talented is the ninth thing I would say about him. For me, it's him and Idris Elba. You?

RW: Do you think that's fair, Mindy? If I say something, do you know how many guys are going to e-mail me and say, "I can't believe you didn't say me"? You're going to get me in trouble! Call me later and we'll talk about it.

MK: What's the best advice you've ever heard?

RW: I had very supportive parents, and you did as well. I had this softball coach when I was doing *How Do You Know* who said, "Every day of your life, you're gonna run into three different kinds of people: 30 percent of the people you run into are gonna lift you up. 30 percent are gonna be completely neutral. And 30 percent are gonna try to bring you down." Even if you just have one in your life, seek out that person who brings out the best in you. ●



Walk the Line, 2005 "Sometimes when we were standing on stage, it felt like Johnny and June were watching over us. I've never worked so hard on a film and felt so sad when it was over."



Sweet Home Alabama, 2002 "'Can't ride two horses with one ass, Sugar Bean!...' Best line ever."



Legally Blonde, 2001 "I loved every minute of making this movie. Jennifer Coolidge, I love you. People of all ages still stop and ask me to do the bend and snap. Classic Elle Woods!"



Election, 1999 "This character inspires more imitations than any other. Oh Tracy, where would you be now? Governor of Alaska? First female president of the United States? Who knows...."



Cruel Intentions, 1999 "It was the heyday of teen movies, and we were all having the time of our lives. I'll never forget driving that vintage Jaguar through the streets of Manhattan."



Pleasantville, 1998 "Tobey and I played brother and sister, and I still think of him that way. I recently saw Paul Walker and he's even more handsome than he was then...Is that even possible?"