

Olga
Kurylenko
Has
Been
Here
Long
Enough

OLGA

kurylenko

PHOTOGRAPHY
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STYLING
CHANTAL DES VIGNES

A few years ago, the actress Olga Kurylenko was, well, acting a lot. This was back in 2018, a year that would have her in six films that would all be released a few months after each other. The roles, for the most part, were substantial ones. In *The Death of Stalin* (released in the US in April), she played Maria Yudina [the pianist believed to have killed Stalin with a concerto]; in *A Breath Away* (also April)—about a toxic 'fog' that has covered Paris—she was one of the main people affected by the fog; *Mara* (September), she played criminal psychologist Kate; *Johnny English Strikes Again* (October), she was the reason why Johnny needed to strike again. The next year would be just as busy.

But that year, Kurylenko wasn't feeling like someone who would appear in these films. Nor did she feel like someone who, at that time, had been in 25 films since their career started over a decade ago. Things were different. Sometime in May, while on a press tour for *The Death of Stalin*, she admitted that she still felt as though she were new to everything.



coat + top BERTHOLD
trousers Miu Miu
boots ROKER
earrings Allighieri
hoop earrings with chain Slim Barrett
earring (left ear) RÄTHEL & WOLF



'I feel just like I'm starting out, you know what I mean?' she told the *Variety* reporter. She continued, adding that she 'had started late' and 'wasn't a child actor who had started at 5 or 12 or even 19.' (In her teens, she had become a model after an agent had scouted her in a Moscow subway station.)



The statement was unexpected and honest. As Kurylenko had said this—with her hand feeling behind her neck—it seemed as though she, like the interviewer, hadn't planned on saying it. It was one of the more honest things she had said in that five-minute conversation, and yet, it was not very long before it no longer held any truth. Until it was only something she had said three years ago. A detail overlooked from an old conversation. One, that, even she had forgotten she had ever said. Because things now are different for her. The biggest change: she no longer feels this way. She has been acting now for 15 years and has done what many child actors who started before her have yet to do: secured a place in the biggest movie franchise of all time, Marvel Studios. In the 2021 film, *Black Widow*, she plays the Taskmaster who spends the film hunting down Black Widow—yet another large role. So, why, after all, should she feel like how she once did, anyway? This year, she's acting again—a lot. And you will see her. Get ready. Here's movie no. 34.

Here is our conversation with Kurylenko which covers the loss of movie theatres, Russian accents in *Black Widow*, and fans upset about her character's transformation.



BOTH PAGES
coat MARTHA
catsuit + belt Pam Hogg
leather harness + suspender belt Fleet Ilya
earrings Slim Barrett

I watched this movie for the first time on my phone. Where did you see it? Were you able to watch it in a theatre?

[her eyes widen] No, not yet. I want to see it in a theatre. I watched this movie [laughs] for the first time on my computer. And it was... yeah, you know. My computer's like a small, MacBook—whatever they call it—that's tiny and it's a very small screen. But I had to watch it prior to [the movie] coming out. There was no other way. They sent me the protective link and that was the only way I could watch it. You watched it on your phone, so yeah, this is how...

Yeah, this is the new normal.

I know, I know, I know...

When you're watching a film that you're in and you know you're about to appear for the very first time, how do you feel leading up to the moment of seeing yourself? Is it like, 'OK, here I come,' or are you reminiscing about the scene as you're watching? Or are you, you know, just watching the movie?

Well, I do know the moment wherever I appear, and especially in that movie [*Black Widow*], when the helmet comes off, I was very keen to see that and was looking forward to seeing which takes they picked and how they edited it and how it was all done. So yeah, it's always with the first time I watch a movie; it's like checking out my work.

Do you like watching yourself? I [pauses]... when I'm happy with what I've done, I like it. When I'm not, I like it less. But I definitely watch myself. I'm not one of those people who wouldn't watch. You know some actors who don't watch any movies that they do? That's not me. I have to see the work I've done and the result. It's important for me and for my growth, knowing what I can do and just keep moving forward.

When you signed up for *Black Widow*, were you caught up with all the Marvel movies? It seems like the movies require a lot of backstory to the point where if you miss one, that's it. Actually, with this one, I don't feel like you have to see other movies in order to understand it. Like you can see *just* this one and you perfectly get the story. I didn't need to do that, but I've watched some Marvel movies—I don't know if I've seen them all. I was always a fan of them and they're always so exciting and action-packed with the superheroes, and the stunts are amazing. And me, [her phone dings]—oops, someone who likes doing stunts, I always thought a Marvel film would be fun for me. That I would enjoy that. So, it's great that it came my way. It's a lot of fun.



I read that, out of the main cast, you're the only native Russian speaker. In a film full of Russian accents, I'm curious if you helped out at all with the accents?

No, I... I think I wasn't asked. But I would have liked to help. It's true: I was the only one [laughs] the only real one. If they want my help, I can always come and do double work.

Let's get into the heavy stuff... I want to talk about your role as Taskmaster. A lot of people are mad about the adaption of Taskmaster in this A) because their powers have changed from what they were in the comics and B) because it's not a guy. What was your first impression of the transformation?

You know, I didn't question it that much. It was their decision, obviously, and they were gonna do it. Marvel decided that and it was done. And they came to me and offered the part, and I mean, what was I gonna say? 'Oh no, I think maybe you should've asked a guy.' No, I was like 'Great! I'm taking it before you change your mind' [laughs]. You know, it's so awesome. It's exciting, and I guess I couldn't have predicted how much of a surprise it was going to be and how people would be reacting to the gender swap. Obviously now, during these last four or five days since it's come out, I've really seen what's going on and what the response is, and yeah. I guess it threw some people off like it was a shock, but I think nowadays the world has been fighting for gender equality.



It's like if a woman is just as good at her skills as a man, why shouldn't she be in the same position? As a woman, Antonia is an excellent Taskmaster. She's not a weaker Taskmaster. There's nothing she can't do. So, really, what's the point? It doesn't make any difference when Taskmaster is in full suit because she's exactly the same. So, it's just that side to her that's a damaged woman who has gone through physical and psychological traumas, and it's a character that suffers. But that's a side that came through in this movie that we've never seen before. And I think that adds something to the character. It makes them more complex. It's not just this unbeatable, killing machine.

bodice Jivomir Domoustchiev
trousers MILÓ MARIA
all jewellery Alighieri



I was gonna say, since fans can be very wary about change in book-to-movie adaptations, especially Marvel fans... You really weren't expecting people to be shocked?

No, no, I wasn't. Look, I'm in the industry and I don't take movies that seriously [laughs]. It's a movie and it's like, 'Oh, whatever, they changed that.' [But] it depends. I mean, of course, if there's a series or something that's very well established and something's changed, it's like 'Whoa, what?' But this character has appeared a couple of times and it hasn't been that much developed unless I missed something.



Yeah no, it hasn't.

So the thing is, we saw a glimpse of it previously, and... I understand when you're a fan and you have your mind set on something and it could throw one off. But as I said, if everyone's saying gender shouldn't matter then we should somehow make peace with that and start accepting. It's a new concept and for these types of things—like skills—gender doesn't matter. Of course, there are biological differences between men and women that can never get away, but as far as intelligence or achievements and power—there is no difference. We can all achieve the same thing if we work hard at it.

When I was preparing for this interview, I found an interview you did in 2018 while promoting *The Death of Stalin* (your first comedy). You told the reporter then that you felt like you were 'just starting out.' With *Black Widow* being your first superhero movie, do you still feel like this?

Yeahhh, interesting. I said that in 2018, huh? That's not that long ago. Wow, look—if I said it that means I meant it at that moment because I usually say what I feel [laughs]. But yeah, I actually don't feel like that anymore. I feel like I've now reached a point where I'm a good part of this industry and I've been here long enough. Maybe I'm now finally settling in. Yeah, it's funny. Maybe in 2018, I was still feeling like... I'm someone who takes time, and I can sometimes be slow to get used to something. But it also depends. I'm also adaptable to things. But look, maybe it's because I'm a little shy. You know, 'have I been here long enough?' I know I don't come off as shy.

Yeah, you don't—I was just about to say that.

It's because I cover it up really well. I come off as the opposite of shy, which is what shy people usually do [laughs]. Because I can't afford being shy! I can't do it. So, I push myself into things that maybe aren't all that natural to me. But now I've gotten used to pushing myself so much it's becoming my second nature. So even if I was born shy, I probably worked on it so much that I'm slowly getting rid of it. But before, you couldn't get me to talk to anyone.

It's interesting because you literally act all the time, so I would've never guessed you had felt that way in 2018 or that you're shy...

Yeah, well, acting is different. It's much more difficult to be yourself. Acting is just another character, and so a lot of actors are shy as they're doing these crazy stunts or screaming. It's more about in real life...

When you finish doing a movie, how long does it take before you're thinking of doing the next one? It feels as though you're already thinking about another one the very next day.

Well, apart from this last year, which was, of course, affected by COVID and going in and out of lockdown constantly, the two years prior I had overworked. Like I think it's safe to say that. So, you're right: suddenly there were all of these films coming out and I was doing them back-to-back. And then suddenly I was collapsing because I was so tired. And I remember thinking in December 2019, just before the pandemic started, I finished my last film two days before Christmas—or around there, it was something ridiculous—and I was like, 'Ugh.' I told my agents, 'OK guys, I'm going to take time off. I can't do it.' And then boom—the pandemic happened. And suddenly nothing was happening anyway. So, my wish to take a break very, very kind of perfectly coincided with the lockdown.

But it was a weird coincidence. Who could've thought the moment I decide to stop... And usually, it's very difficult [to stop] because the moment I say, 'OK guys, I want to take a break,' they go, 'Yeah, OK, but there's this offer. We know you're on holiday but just, you know, consider.' And then I'm like [gasps], 'This is awesome. OK, I can't say no to that! OK, let's go.' And that's how I can't take a break. Because I'm like 'Oh! Shit. I like this.' And I get excited and I go, and it's a problem.

What'd you do over quarantine, anyway? You just relaxed?

What'd I do?? People were like 'Oh, what do I do? I'm bored.' Look—everyone has different lives, but I don't think I've ever been bored. I always have so much to do that my mind is overworking and there's always something to do. No matter how much I try and tick things off the list, it's never finished. It just keeps growing and I've never caught up. Even during the pandemic, I thought 'Oh, now I'm gonna catch up.' I did, much more than in busy times, but I still haven't. There's always something to do.

coat + shorts MM6 Maison Margiela
bodice + earrings + cuffs Graham Cruz
bra Agent Provocateur
suspender belt Elissa Poppy
chokers + rings Slim Barrett
ring (middle finger on right hand) Alighieri

You seem to switch a lot between doing a French movie and doing an American one...

What puts you in the mood to do a French one? And an American?

Ohh I mean, they're different. I lived in France for 13 years and I have a French passport so I'm obviously very attached to France. And I started there. That country gave me my first opportunity and they were the first to take the risk on me to give me the parts. And I'm grateful. It's not easy. I went to the US, and I remember I tried to get an agent but they told me, 'No, you haven't done anything.' And I said 'Well, how do you want me to do anything if I don't have an agent? It's a cycle.' And they said, 'First you do something, then you come, and if it's successful—we'll sign you up.' They didn't want to work on me. They wanted to sign up someone who was ready. But France didn't do that. They said 'Oh? You've done nothing? OK, you're a nobody but we'll send you and we'll give you this chance.' You know what I mean?



BOTH PAGES
latex trench Atsuko Kudo earrings Slim Barrett

Do you notice a difference between French and American audiences?

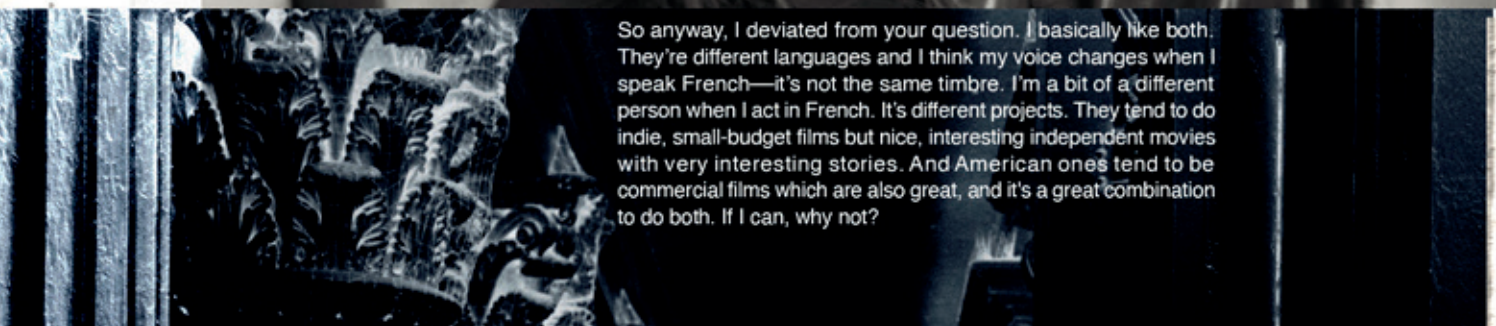
I think the French are more interested in films that are more artistic and don't have such a commercial streak. So, they would probably have more patience to sit and watch a movie where there's a lot of silence, you know what I mean? But it's not 100%. This is just a big generalization. Because I've met a lot of Americans that'll talk to me about [Michelangelo] Antonioni and I was like, 'Wow, you're American. You watch these films?' So, it depends. They're different markets but... it's all cool. People are different and I think that's why there are different types of films for different people. [laughs]



Going back to the topic of isolation, many people realized during this time that they weren't very happy in their careers and as a result, did a 360... You obviously love what you do, but I'm curious: after all this, what keeps you acting? What keeps me acting? I guess I do love it. It's a great job—I love expressing myself. I love getting under the skin of another character and to get out of myself and be someone else. I'm not sure if that's healthy but [laughs], you know. To understand other personalities and be able to live my life through the eyes of someone else and make it my own is just, I don't know. It's fascinating. I like doing that.

Black Widow now in cinemas and available on Disney+ with Premier Access.

interview by Hailey Johnson
photography Arved Colvin-Smith
styling Chantal des Vignes
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makeup Alex Babsky @ Premier Hair and Make-up using Clé de Peau Beauté
production Angeliki Sofronas
photo assistant Jomile Kazlauskaitė
styling assistant Femi Hurley-Scott
Location Institute of Contemporary Arts, London



So anyway, I deviated from your question. I basically like both. They're different languages and I think my voice changes when I speak French—it's not the same timbre. I'm a bit of a different person when I act in French. It's different projects. They tend to do indie, small-budget films but nice, interesting independent movies with very interesting stories. And American ones tend to be commercial films which are also great, and it's a great combination to do both. If I can, why not?