

Celestial being

Post-*Black Swan*, Natalie Portman became Hollywood's most bankable star, pirouetting off with an Oscar (and the handsome choreographer who'd taught her to dance). But her latest role, as an astrophysicist, brought her back to earth with a bump. She talks to *Elaine Lipworth* about nerves, motherhood and her Jewish faith

Photograph by David Slijper

Natalie Portman is raving about working in Britain. "It's amazing to see how robust the British film industry is," says the actress, who recently spent several months in Surrey making her latest film, *Thor: The Dark World*. "I think I've shot in England more than anywhere else in the world, between doing *Star Wars*, *Closer*, *V for Vendetta*, *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *Your Highness*. For *Thor 1* stayed in Ascot, which was really beautiful."

Now 32, Portman has been acting professionally since she was 11 and is accustomed to working with cinema's brightest and best: George Lucas in the *Star Wars* prequels, Woody Allen in

Everyone Says I Love You, Mike Nichols in *Closer*. In 2011 she won the best actress Oscar for her complex portrayal of the deeply disturbed ballerina in *Black Swan*, and *Forbes* magazine recently named her the film industry's "most bankable star". Studio executives and her PR team treat her like royalty. In short, Portman is at the top of her game, so it's rather touching to discover that she was star-struck by Anthony Hopkins on the set of *Thor: The Dark World*.

"I was completely intimidated," she says. "I kept messing up lines around him because I was so nervous, and he was so sweet about it. He made me feel at ease. He'd be like, 'That's a really hard line to

say,' and I'd be like, 'No, I just can't get it out.' Your jaw drops on the floor watching him he's just... Man," she sighs, shaking her head, "he's a giant among actors."

Petite with large, soulful eyes, Portman is classically beautiful. She is wearing a sleeveless, midnight-blue Dior dress (she is the face of the brand) when we meet for tea in Anaheim, California, for the first of two interviews (the second takes place over the phone a few weeks later when the Israeli-born actress is in Tel Aviv). Warm and engaging, she veers charmingly in conversation from German philosophers to anecdotes about "giggling fits" during serious romantic scenes with Chris Hemsworth,



her co-star in *Thor: The Dark World*. “We would catch each other’s eye in the wrong way; we couldn’t stop laughing and the crew would say, ‘OK enough.’” For all her experience, sophistication and balletic poise – she sits upright, sculpted arms neatly folded – there is still something of the ingénue about the actress, who is given to outbursts of sheer enthusiasm. “I love my job. I want to do things that are positive,” she says at one point.

Thor: The Dark World is a high-octane adventure set in two parallel worlds: Earth and Asgard – the Nordic home of the Gods. Portman plays an astrophysicist, Jane Foster, the love interest of the hammer-wielding God of Thunder (Hemsworth – most recently seen as the Formula One driver James Hunt in *Rush*). Inevitably they are battling evil and saving the universe. Portman says that the main attraction of the film was the opportunity to play a positive female role model in a big-budget film. “The fallacy in Hollywood is that if you’re making a ‘feminist’ story, the woman kicks ass and wins. That’s not feminist, that’s macho,” she said recently. Jane Foster doesn’t throw her weight around in sword fights with the boys. She uses her intellect to help her brawny co-star combat a malevolent race of dark elves. “Unfortunately, there are still not that many girls going into science, engineering and technology,” she says. “Jane’s got a mission. She’s looking for something for herself, gravitational anomalies, scientific exploration.”

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It sounds as if the acting on *Thor* didn’t present much of a challenge. “I watched a bunch of physics documentaries, like *Physics For Dummies*,” she says. But by all accounts she had fun on set: a highlight, she says, was punching Tom Hiddleston, who plays the god Loki, in the face. “He acted like he could handle it, but I think I actually hurt him.” She also enjoyed

working with the director Alan Taylor (*Game of Thrones*): “He is an incredibly bright man. He’d be like, ‘No, that’s a Kantian point of view, not a Hegelian one,’ and you’d be like, ‘Wow!’”

Portman was born Natalie Hershlag in Israel in 1981. Portman is her grandmother’s maiden name; she has dual Israeli and American citizenship and speaks fluent Hebrew. Her Israeli father, Avner, is a doctor specialising in fertility; her American mother, Shelley, is an artist. They moved to America when Natalie was a toddler, eventually settling in New York. She was a bright child. “I did a lot of science and entered science fairs,” she says. She attended theatre camps and, when she was 10, was



“discovered” by an agent who spotted her potential as a model. Portman was 11 when the French director Luc Besson cast her in *Léon* (1994) as a child who is adopted by a middle-aged hit man (Jean Reno) when her family is killed. It was a fantastic performance that kick-started her career. She went on to appear in *Heat* and earned further stellar reviews for *Beautiful Girls*. Being cast in the *Star Wars* prequels catapulted the teenager to global fame in 1999.

Portman credits her parents with instilling her with strong values. “My parents were wonderful,” she says. “They were completely present, completely loving, they allowed me to do what I was passionate about and I understand now how much they protected me. I was lucky to act and have a regular household, lifestyle

and friends.” They weren’t strict, “but maintained a calm and normal life for me that was far away from movie land”. Portman is an only child, which, she says, “definitely allowed me to do movies, because my mum would come with me on the set and my dad would visit on weekends. It would have been much harder if there had been another kid.”

In 1999, amid *Star Wars* hysteria, Portman decided to put her career on



Clockwise from left Portman makes her screen debut in *Léon*, 1994; as Nina in *Black Swan*; in *Thor: The Dark World*



hold and study psychology at Harvard. “I’d rather be smart than be a movie star,” she said at the time. Those college years were invaluable, she now says, “giving me the tools to teach myself”, as well as allowing her a chance to meet a group of un-Hollywood friends. “It’s amazing to be exposed to different things and I’m constantly learning from them. I have a friend who’s a composer, a friend who runs a hedge fund, a friend who’s doing stroke research. What I do, I realise, is a drop in the ocean,” she tells me.

So what, I ask, does she think is the value of acting? “I think that for the audience, caring about someone else’s life rather than their own for a few hours, imagining what the characters go through, the excitement and disappointment, joys and sorrows, is a practice in empathy.” What impact has winning the Oscar for *Black Swan* had on her career? “It was obviously a huge honour, but at the end of the day, how can you say that one piece of art is better than another? It’s not like a race.”

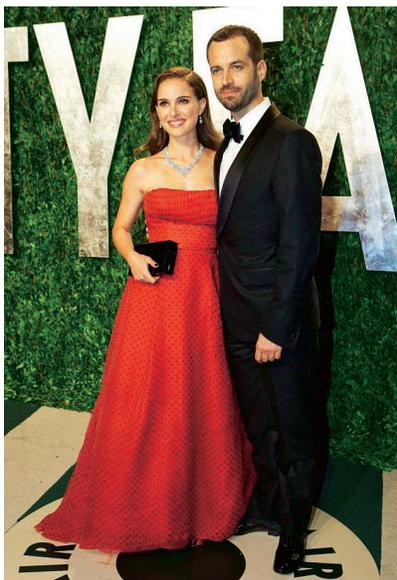
Black Swan, however, did change her life. To portray Nina, the driven, troubled ballerina, Portman undertook a year of hard training with the French dancer and choreographer Benjamin Millepied, to whom she is now married. They have a two-year-old son, Aleph. Does she continue to dance? “For fun with friends, but not ballet,” she says. “I go to see ballet quite often and love it.”

Portman talks happily about her interests outside acting: a vegetarian since childhood, she is a keen vegan cook. “I really love food,” she says. “I’m as much of a foodie as a vegan can be. I like the blog Coconut & Quinoa that my friend [the chef] Amy Chaplin does. The granola and chia pudding and tofu bakes are favourites.” But she won’t discuss her private life, except to say, “I love being a mum,” and that parenthood has made her more accepting. “I’m less judgmental than before I had a kid. The biggest thing I’ve learnt is that parenting is a totally different experience for every person. Everything is cool, there are no rules – I mean, apart from not hurting your kid. Some people breast-feed until their babies are five, and some don’t breast-feed at all. There are no rules about what it means to be a feminist, or a good mother. For some it’s going to be right to go back to work, for others it’s going to be right to stop working completely.”

A working mother herself, Portman has recently been on set for the director Terrence Malick’s *Knight of Cups* (reportedly about the excesses of celebrity) and a Western, *Jane Got a Gun*. Next autumn she will be moving to Paris with her family, when her husband takes up his position as director of the Paris Opera Ballet. “I speak French,

not well, but enough to get around and hopefully it will improve while I am there. I’m really excited. It’s everyone’s dream to get to live in Paris.”

Fulfilling another closely held dream, Portman is about to direct her first film, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, based on the bestselling memoir by the Israeli author Amos Oz. She also wrote the screenplay. “It is his coming-of-age story set during the creation of the state of Israel.” She is renting a house in Tel Aviv with her family, doing research and pre-production on the project, when we



Portman with her husband, the dancer and choreographer Benjamin Millepied

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speak by phone a few weeks after our chat in California. The prospect of moving behind the camera, she says, is “exciting and scary. I think it’s kind of good not to be aware of how ill-equipped you are for the job you have ahead of you,” she says with a laugh, “or else you wouldn’t try anything. You have to be a bit delusional to try anything creative really, to not understand how high the mountain is before you start climbing it.”

She describes working in Israel as “absolutely fascinating. It is the kind of country where you put your finger on a windowsill and you get an interesting story. It’s interesting to be from a place and feel part of a place, but also a stranger in it. I’m definitely a foreigner here. People here would not think of me

as an Israeli. The culture I grew up in, the way I look at the world, is American,” says Portman, a practising Jew, who is raising her son in the religion.

Growing up Jewish, having spent most of my own teenage summers in Israel, I’m interested in Portman’s sense of identity, whether she’s conflicted, where she considers home. “The older I get, the more I realise how different it is to be a Jew in a Jewish place as opposed to a Jew in a non-Jewish place,” she says. “It’s definitely a different feeling in terms of how freely you can be yourself and celebrate your culture and religion. It’s very different being in Israel than in cities that don’t have big Jewish populations, where it can sometimes feel dangerous to be Jewish, and you understand why there is a need for a place where you don’t feel

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that way. I feel it in lots of places. Pretty much everywhere. New York and LA [where she currently lives] are the exceptions. On holidays in New York the city shuts down. My non-Jewish friends know how to wish you Shanah Tova, Happy New Year in Hebrew. In other places in the world it ranges from people who aren’t familiar with Judaism to people who are hostile towards it.”

Is she optimistic about peace in the Middle East? She pauses. “Individual friendships happen daily already and have for centuries between people of all backgrounds. The truth is I don’t really understand enough. I’m not a politician. Of course I hope for only the best. I wish that one day it will be quiet for everyone in the region, for men, women, different religions, different ethnicities. Politically, it’s complicated, much more complicated than anyone outside even knows.”

At which point the philosophical Ms Portman ends our conversation to attend to more domestic considerations: she has to get back to her two-year-old son. ●
“Thor: The Dark World” is out on Wednesday