



Sequin jacket by Paco Rabanne.

Wilde Child

Olivia Wilde steals the show as a bad-girl stripper in the upcoming flick *Butter*, but here, the actress reveals a beautiful side that is much more than skin deep

| By Andrew Myers | Photography by Markus Klinko & Indrani for Opus Photo | Styling by GK Reid |

The year is 2048 and the newspaper headline proclaims a “Wilde Win!” This is not a reference to an acting award for Olivia Wilde—although any number might be shimmering in the now 63-year-old actress’ memories—nor to her slew of film roles including 2011’s *Cowboys & Aliens* and *The Change-Up*, and the release of *Butter* in March 2012, a left-leaning sociopolitical satire with significant election-year overtones in which Wilde stars alongside Jennifer Garner, Alicia Silverstone, Hugh Jackman and Ashley Greene as the local bad-girl stripper intent on winning Iowa’s high-profile butter-carving contest.

Rather, the headline references candidate Wilde’s win in the U.S. presidential election, 36 years into the future. She’s assumed the political role of her lifetime: the liberal equivalent of that other erstwhile actor, Ronald Reagan. It could happen. Like the Gipper, Wilde holds fast to her principles and believes in them profoundly, and she’s not only immensely personable, she’s also surprisingly approachable. She has the common touch. Then there’s the physical beauty factor, which makes for Beltway magic when combined with an innate can-do optimism.

While the roads to the White House are as varied and unreliable as those to Hollywood stardom, Wilde was raised ringside in Washington, D.C. In addition to having a front-row seat for past presidential races, she also has a strong sense of the difference between the way in which things are supposed to work and the way they function in real time.

Born Olivia Jane Cockburn in 1984, Wilde is the daughter of Andrew and Leslie Cockburn, two Washington journalists who have covered national and international politics and policy since the 1980s. They have investigated cover-ups and blowouts for the full gamut of media outlets, penning articles for national newspapers and magazines; writing books (Andrew’s latest in 2007 took Donald Rumsfeld to the woodshed); producing segments for network news and news magazine shows such as *60 Minutes*; and making documentaries (their 2009 film, *American Casino*, explored the housing crisis). “My parents are incredible,” Wilde states, full stop. “They’re passionate about truth-seeking, striving for justice; they’re part of the original crew of investigative journalists.” Peter Jennings was a close family friend and the late Christopher Hitchens was Wilde’s onetime babysitter (she later returned the favor and watched over his daughter).

Though let’s be clear, Wilde didn’t grow up around a bunch of nose-buried-inside-a-book policy wonks. Her parents really know how to throw a party. “I still can so easily recall the sounds of conversation,

laughter and glasses from the 20 people seated around their dinner table.” She also remembers the roar from larger cocktail parties, and the informal debates during smaller gatherings. More than simple parties, these were salons; must-stops in the swim of old Washington where politicians from both sides of the aisle, foreign diplomats, intellectuals and visiting celebrities mixed in a cross-pollinating Georgetown-townhouse world. A place that once included such power-brokering hostesses as Pamela Harriman and Evangeline Bruce, and which—in the less congenial present where polemics mean breaking heads rather than bread—are no more.

For Wilde, these parties—magnifying her parents’ world, its excitement and its intellectual fecundity—were seminal. And although guests might include a foreign leader or a Rolling Stone named Mick, “there was never any fame-whoring,” Wilde says. “Nobody was ever introduced to me and my sister as a ‘success,’ or as famous; we were told what they had done, what they’re doing, what’s unique about them.” But older sister Chloe, now a civil rights lawyer in New York, was, according to Wilde, “more introverted” and content to listen attentively and remain unobtrusive. Wilde was headstrong, at least as described by the famously headstrong Hitchens. “I was a tyrant,” she says, laughing, “assertive in my opinions and abilities. I made myself very present.”

It was this tendency to be a not-so-silent witness that won Wilde her earliest reviews. “I think we have an actress on our hands’ was something I heard very early, most often from my parents’ friends and extended family,” she recalls. “It was probably not said as a compliment.” Regardless, she found her creative self early. There were the usual games of dress-up and role-playing, which she did precociously by age 4; there was also an early interest in horror fiction. Wilde created a library for her prized books and charged a penny per rental. “I lived in my head, I had a very active imagination, I could play alone in my room for hours and see whole movies in my head,” she says. “This blurring of the line between reality and fantasy is something I think all kids have, and I was very lucky because my parents encouraged it. They really let me embrace the idiosyncratic, to carve out my own identity based on my own interests.”

Parental encouragement was broad-based. “They never would have allowed me to be a child actress, but they took my passion seriously and expected me to be serious about it. To work hard, to study the greats,” says Wilde, who enrolled in acting classes early, and, after the eighth grade, transferred to Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., for high school. She was particularly attracted to the prep CONTINUED...



Vintage gown, shoes, cuff and ring by Yves Saint Laurent. Opposite page: White lace top by GK Reid.





Vintage ivory evening gown by Yuki.

Hair by Peter Butler at Tracey Mattingly
Makeup by Christian McCulloch at Tracey Mattingly

MANICURE: NATYANA MOLOT USING CHANEL FOR ARTISTS BY TIMOTHY HYNANO.COM | PRODUCTION: STACEY THIEL | DIGITAL TECH: KAITLYN BARLOW | PHOTO ASSISTANTS: PENGJIN JUNG, METE OZEREN AND DIMITRI KOURI SPECIAL THANKS TO TIMOTHY OULTON AND ABC CARPET & HOME

...CONTINUED school's theater department. "There was a main stage, two black box spaces, studio theaters, playwriting classes, student producing—incredible," she says, even now singing the praises of two teachers in particular, English teacher Seth Bardo and acting instructor Kevin Healan. "[Healan] had worked with Sean Penn, and I floored Sean by mentioning his name by the pool of the Hotel Oloffson in Haiti a few years ago." Wilde was in Haiti as a board member of Artists for Peace and Justice, which provides education and health services in a country she was introduced to when her mother produced a report exposing the brutality of a U.S.-trained Haitian military unit after the Duvalier regime.

It was at Andover, while appearing as Gwendolen in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, that Olivia Cockburn became Olivia Wilde, a stage name homage to the piece's playwright. "It was the first time I felt I owned the stage. It was wonderful," she says. The name was also in deference to the many writers in her family, many of whom used pennames, as well as to her own Irish roots; her father grew up in County Waterford, and she has been a frequent visitor there.

It's not surprising, then, that Wilde's parents signed off on her plans to spend a summer at Dublin's prestigious Gaiety School of

enough for Wilde to defer matriculation at Bard College several times, then indefinitely, and enough to convince her parents she was making the right decision. This was no easy feat considering that Dad and most of his family went to Oxford and Mom was a member of the second class of women to graduate from Yale. But it was her role in Nick Cassavetes' 2006 film *Alpha Dog* that proved to be Wilde's professional watershed. "It was my first transcendent experience in film or television, where I thought, 'This is why I'm here,'" she says. "It gave me courage to strive for more."

"More" meant a main role on *The Black Donnellys*, an NBC drama that didn't take, off-Broadway satisfaction in a political thriller called *Beauty on the Vine*, and later that same year, *House M.D.* "I wanted to do another play, but my agent came to see me and asked if I'd do *House*. I hadn't seen it, so I watched a bunch, then flew back to L.A. and auditioned," she says. "I didn't get the role I auditioned for, I got [the part for character] 13."

It must be her lucky number as she's now spent four years on the hugely successful Fox medical drama. The show proved to be Wilde's professional breakout, leading to her first major movie part in 2010's *TRON: Legacy*, and her current slate of films that started with last summer's *Cowboys & Aliens* and includes *The Words* with Dennis Quaid and Jeremy Irons (which premiered at Sundance this year), as well as *Blackbird* with Eric Bana and

"I never thought my looks were right to be an ingénue and I was fine with that."

Acting. But they became less enthusiastic when one of Wilde's instructors suggested their daughter take a "gap year" before college, and spend it in L.A. in order to make sure she wanted to be in this business. Wilde says, "My parents knew I'd been working very hard, that I was very serious. Luckily, since my dad is European, they were comfortable with the idea of a gap year."

Luckier still, although her parents were not of Hollywood, they had conceived and co-produced *The Peacemaker*, starring George Clooney and Nicole Kidman, the first movie from DreamWorks, released in 1997, and based on their book *One Point Safe*. Wilde had gone with them to L.A. for the press junket. "It was my first trip to Los Angeles and my first time in a chauffeur-driven town car," she says.

For advice, Wilde turned to her parents' friend Sarah Pillsbury, producer of movies such as *How to Make an American Quilt*. Pillsbury suggested an internship with a casting director, specifically Mali Finn, whom Wilde describes as "the best in the world... and the toughest." She says that Finn set the standard on how to behave during auditions and how to prepare. "And Mali let me pore over VHS tapes of great auditions from actors like Sam Rockwell, Angelina Jolie and Russell Crowe," Wilde says.

Though instrumental, Finn never sent Wilde on auditions. "After seeing the thousands of headshots at Mali's, I was under no illusions. I really thought I'd be a character actress, a theater actress—I never thought my looks were right to be an ingénue and I was fine with that," explains the woman who *Maxim* named No. 1 on its 2009 Hot 100 List. "Even so, I wanted the experience of auditioning."

Through a friend's father who was a manager, she got it—and she landed more and more auditions as favorable reports filtered back. And then came roles, among them Jerry Bruckheimer's high-profile, short-lived *Skin*. "We spent more time doing press than working on the show," says Wilde. That was followed by an eye-catching part on *The O.C.* "I was supposed to stay for four episodes but stayed for 13." They were

Welcome to People starring Chris Pine—both with no set release dates as of yet. "Some people think I'm stupid for taking so many supporting and smaller roles, but I love it," she says. "It reminds me of being in a company of actors, where you might be playing Lady Macbeth in one play and a nameless girl in another; you learn so much."

But acting is not necessarily what she considers to be her defining role. Politics, political activism and humanitarian work tether her to her family and play a huge role in her day-to-day life. Wilde was an early Obama supporter, and campaigned on his behalf. "I really believed in him as a candidate, and got to know my country," she says, "I hadn't been in the Midwest before, nor really in the South. I went door-to-door and it was great." While political activism, humanitarianism and a liberal stance are hardly new in Hollywood, Wilde has a sensibility that seems to combine the idealism of youth and education with the healthy skepticism of a seasoned reporter. Asked if she continues to support Obama as fervently, she answers (with nary a pause): "It's much harder to run on the concepts of hope and change. Student loans, banking reform? People want specifics now and they deserve them. I'm an advocate of youth participation in politics, and I hope there will be a swell of participation again, but I hope it's based on actual knowledge of policy."

Last year marked Wilde's final season on *House M.D.*, as well as the end of her marriage to Tao Ruspoli, the documentary filmmaker, photographer and Italian prince whom she married in 2003 (Wilde is currently dating *Saturday Night Live* comedian Jason Sudeikis). It also signaled the start of an impressive résumé of film credits that will continue throughout the year. But while Wilde singles out *Butter* for the clever script, incredible cast and the new role it allowed her to play (she admits she loved putting on those stripper heels), can she really, after playing a tattooed exotic dancer, sit tall in the Oval Office in 2048, embodying a political renaissance based on mindful, mass participation? It doesn't seem like much of a stretch if you recall Reagan's own claim to on-screen fame happened with the help of a chimpanzee. Consider it Hollywood magic. ■