



Cosmic Girl

For more than two decades, we've watched Kirsten Dunst ride the ups and downs of Hollywood. Now, with the critically acclaimed *Melancholia* out this month, the Cannes award-winning actress is poised to take on the world—and outer space.

| By Andrew Myers | Photography by Warwick Saint at copiousmanagement.com |
| Styling by Heathermary Jackson at [Streeters](http://Streeters.com) | Shot on location at Juliet Supperclub |

Kirsten Dunst was born geriatric. Not in terms of wrinkles or wattles, nor any kind of weariness or weebegone Weltschmerz. To the contrary: Physically the 29-year-old Manhattan-based actress is the incarnation of dewy freshness, Botticelli-like, fair of hair and health with an almost picture-book prettiness that escapes *The Precious* via a light-bright air and attitude contrasted with an almost preternatural “knowingness”—one that burns behind her eyes and often plays across her face.

Call it an unexpected juxtaposition. Call it subcutaneous sagacity (if you have a dictionary at hand). Call it, as did Sofia Coppola (who directed Dunst in *The Virgin Suicides* in 1999 and *Marie Antoinette* in 2006), “that mysterious quality that makes you want to watch someone.” Or just call Dunst an old soul wrapped in a new package.

Regardless, it's this ineffable there-there that shines forth from Dunst's character Justine, the lead in Danish director Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*, out this month, for which Dunst won the Best Actress award at the Cannes Film Festival last May. It's her first major award (if Teen Choice and MTV Movie Awards are discounted), and Dunst is particularly proud. “To be part of that group!” she says, referring to previous winners, who have included Vanessa Redgrave, Joanne Woodward, Helen Mirren, Anouk Aimée and Meryl Streep. “It's just a superb group of women.”

Justine is, to say the least, complicated. And if *les mots justes* to describe Dunst's *je ne sais quoi* are hard to find, consolation can be found in Justine, who's tongue-tied, too. Likely clinically depressed, she is down on her wedding day and equally so about the end of the world (a rogue planet called *Melancholia* is about to collide with Earth, news of which would admittedly cast a pall over any nuptials). “She's trying to do all the things expected to make her feel better,” says Dunst, adding that Justine is “almost psychic.”

But while Justine gets her groove on in the apocalypse, Dunst must give a performance that's largely taciturn. “The dialogue is

pretty sparse, but in the script there are clear, long descriptions: ‘Justine calmly does this, goes there, looks out at.’ Lars also put in references to songs and paintings,” says Dunst, who calls playing Justine “very cathartic, like from a great cry” while acknowledging how grueling the process could be: “The constant exploration of self and feeling takes a lot out of you.”

It's a performance built on Dunst's unique abilities, which audiences first appreciated in 1994's *Interview with the Vampire*. In her big break, Dunst played Claudia, a 12-year-old Creole-turned-fanged bloodsucker who ages 30 years throughout the course of the film—while changing corporally not at all. This progression, from innocent victim to calculating killer, as well as from prepubescent girl to a mature woman trapped in a prepubescent shell, was conveyed with precocious nuance and wit.

Her first words as a vampire with ringlets who has just tasted the blood of her first victim? A succinct but penetrating “I want some more.” Drollery dropped 30 years later in Paris at the *Theatre des Vampires*, where Claudia learns she's witnessing vampires pretending to be humans pretending to be vampires? “How avant-garde.” Dunst stole the show from Tom Cruise, then the world's biggest box-office behemoth, and from rising star Brad Pitt. She was 12 when the movie was released, 10 when it was shot.

Born in New Jersey in 1982 as the eldest of two, Dunst moved to Los Angeles in 1991 and has worked consistently, at times continuously, since then—her childhood, adolescence and young adulthood chronicled on celluloid (much in the manner of actresses of older generations during the heyday of the studio system: Elizabeth Taylor was 12 when she had her big break with *National Velvet*). It's an early path and committed pace Dunst finds neither all that noteworthy nor too unusual. “I had a pretty normal childhood—school, friends,” she says. “Don't kids train for gymnastics their whole lives, too?”

A model by age 3 (she was with Ford, and CONTINUED...

Star-print silk and lace dress, \$2,295, by Dolce & Gabbana at Saks Fifth Avenue, South Coast Plaza. Onyx necklace in 18K yellow gold with peridot, amethyst, citrine and diamonds, \$54,000, at Bulgari, South Coast Plaza.



Wool and silk sweater, \$650, top, \$450, lace skirt, \$1,470, and beret, price upon request, all at Prada, South Coast Plaza. Diamond Carpet bracelet set in platinum and three-row diamond bracelet set in platinum (worn throughout), both priced upon request, at Harry Winston, South Coast Plaza. Mini fringe necklace with sapphires and diamonds in platinum, \$77,000, and Metro diamond bangle in 18K gold, \$6,300, both at Tiffany & Co., South Coast Plaza.



Lace dress, \$1,295, by Carven at Opening Ceremony, Los Angeles. Coat, \$950, by Acne at acnestudios.com. Plexiglass headband by Miu Miu. Similar styles available at Miu Miu, South Coast Plaza. Two-row swag necklace with aquamarines and diamonds in platinum, \$45,000, and Metro diamond bangle in 18K gold, \$6,300, both at Tiffany & Co., South Coast Plaza. Diamond rings set in platinum, both priced upon request, at Harry Winston, South Coast Plaza.





Jacket in saharienne gabardine with silver embroidery, price upon request, at Yves Saint Laurent, South Coast Plaza. Two-row swag necklace with aquamarines and diamonds in platinum, \$45,000, and Metro diamond bangle in 18K gold, \$6,300, both at Tiffany & Co., South Coast Plaza.

Hair by Sebastian Sclarici at Jed Root Inc. Makeup by Scott Andrew at Jed Root Inc.

MANICURE: DOKNA DUBINSKY FOR ARTISTBYTIMOTHYFRANCO.COM | PHOTO ASSISTANTS: ELISE GANNETT, SANTIAGO PORTILLO AND CHRISTOPHER BLYTHE | STYLISTS ASSISTANT: BRITTANY BERGER

...CONTINUED continues to pose; currently she's the face of the Bulgari perfume Mon Jasmin Noir), Dunst made her film debut in 1989 in Woody Allen's *New York Stories*, followed by *The Bonfire of the Vanities* the next year, in which she played Tom Hanks' daughter.

In the ensuing two decades, there has been a smattering of TV, such as *ER*, on which she had a recurring role, as well as a TV movie or two. But the bulk of Dunst's resume is devoted to film: critically well-received blockbusters such as the *Spider-Man* trilogy, in which she literally played the girl next door; teen hits including *Bring It On*; fun fare such as *Dick*; literary adaptations like *Little Women* and *The Virgin Suicides*; critical successes, among them *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*; titled leads, namely *Marie Antoinette*.

Inevitably, there were also a few bombs, such as 2008's *How*

the planet [*Melancholia*], that she has an unearthly romantic lost love," says Dunst, who feels much closer to her characters as a result and feels this affinity translates to the screen—a belief that seems substantiated by her award at Cannes.

Indeed, if there has been a thorn in Dunst's bed of French roses, it came unexpectedly from von Trier, who in a press conference four days before her victory launched into a whacked oration involving Nazis and Hitler, Jews and Israel. It was, the controversial auteur subsequently explained, intended as a joke, an example of the Scandinavian sense of humor gone subzero cold. Raising hackles, not hilarity, it won him a one-way ticket out of the Festival de Cannes, where he was declared persona non grata: no happy *Melancholia* party, no grand dinner. In short, *nichts*.

Perhaps even worse for Dunst, she was sitting next to von Trier during his inadvertent performance, her shock and incredulity now

“Look at [von Trier’s] previous movies. They’re centered on women: real, authentic women. You don’t get the opportunity to play these roles very often.”

to *Lose Friends and Alienate People*, after which Dunst took a significant break, perhaps her first since the womb. She endured a bout of depression, sought help, questioned her life journey, and basically wrestled with the angst and big questions common to college students the world over. Changes were made—she moved to New York, for one—and she emerged recommitted to her craft and career.

Working with von Trier was a big aspect of that resolve. Dunst worked hard for the role, flying to Copenhagen to meet the director in person. “Look at his previous movies,” Dunst says, referring to the likes of *Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark*, *Dogville* and *Manderlay*. “They’re centered on women: real, authentic women. You don’t get the opportunity to play these roles very often,” she adds, noting her desire to work with two other European directors, Pedro Almodóvar and Michael Haneke, both of whom often feature complicated female protagonists.

And just as Dunst views the role of Justine as a professional watershed, so does she view her preparation for the role as a turning point in terms of how she creates a performance. “My process is much more intense now,” says the actress who exhibited a strong work ethic even as a child, a punctuality and precision she attributes to her German-born father. As far as *Melancholia*’s Justine, Dunst engaged in what she coins “character therapy.” By turns analytical and whimsical, it ranges from a survey of the script (resulting in pages of annotations) and a breakdown of the character and story, to free-associative musings on the planet *Melancholia* and Justine herself. “I feel she came from

set in the amber that is YouTube (“Lars, shut up, this is terrible,” she can be heard saying). “He apologized, and obviously I forgave him,” she says, adding that he says “crazy” things all the time—“That’s just Lars, and he honestly, honestly didn’t mean what he said, but he just kept going, digging himself deeper”—while also noting his offensive comments couldn’t have had worse timing, coming on the heels of clothing designer John Galliano’s drunken anti-Semitic rant last winter (yes, also findable on YouTube).

Awkward moments aside, Dunst has nothing but praise for von Trier as a director. She cites his support on location (*Melancholia* was shot in Sweden in the summer of 2010); his faith and trust in her and her abilities (“I hate over-talking things with a director”); his candor in helping her prepare for her role (“He spoke with me about his own depression”); and his overall generosity as an artist: “Working with Lars is like being at the best film school,” says Dunst, who has directed several short films and is interested, eventually, in directing—and producing—a feature.

Not that she wears career-only blinders. Dunst takes vacations now—long ones, even. She talks with certitude about having kids. (“Two kids would be good. Maybe three.”) She’s open to forks in the road: “I have no problem with acting not being my life; there are many other things to explore.” She’s comfortable going off-piste: “I’m pretty ‘wait and see what happens.’ Well, unless it’s about my Halloween costume—I can’t believe I haven’t figured out this year’s yet!”

Above all, Dunst is energized, and says she’s inspired and content. To support her claim, she points to Justine: “You have to be in a good headspace to play depressed.” ■