



# MAGNIFIQUE MARION

Known for roles that push her to the limit, Marion Cotillard's latest film has her looking chic in jade satin while mowing down Nazis. Jane Cornwell meets the French actor in Paris to talk movies, life and *that* relationship with co-star Brad Pitt.

I have a need, a desire, to experience depth,” says Marion Cotillard, fixing me with her expressive doe eyes as she sits, cross-legged, in an armchair in a luxury hotel in central Paris. “And my way of doing that is especially dramatic.”

The French star, 41, has a penchant for extreme acting. Or at least, for choosing roles that push her to her limits. There was the double amputee in *Rust and Bone* in 2012. The Polish refugee coerced into prostitution in *The Immigrant* in 2013. Her Lady Macbeth in 2015’s *Macbeth*, mad with grief and vengeance in a hail-blasted winter landscape, unleashing all sorts of horror after convincing her husband to murder the king. Then there was her heartbreaking portrayal of Edith Piaf in the 2007 biopic *La Vie En Rose*, a role that won her the Best Actress Oscar, the first ever for a performance in French, and which transformed her into an international movie icon.

Little wonder: eyebrows and hairline shaved, Cotillard bent her willowy 170-centimetre frame into Piaf’s 147-centimetre body and acted her guts out as a lovelorn cabaret singer with a morphine addiction. The performance had an awestruck Cate Blanchett declaring her a “genius”.

Today, clad in a flowing patterned silk dress, her stiletto heels kicked off onto the shagpile, Cotillard seems remarkably laid-back for a mother of one (Marcel, 5) with four films out this year – including *Allied*, the Robert Zemeckis-directed World War II drama we’re here to discuss. Not to mention her ongoing role as a model/performer/muse for French fashion house Christian Dior, and as an eco-activist for campaigning organisations including Greenpeace.

Oh, and she’s pregnant. Cotillard, who is sipping green tea, a wrapper from a protein ball on the table next to her, doesn’t actually tell me this. Along with the rest of the world, I find out two weeks later, when frenzied media conjecture forces the actress to issue a statement on Instagram both denying involvement in the forthcoming divorce of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt, her co-star in *Allied*, and announcing her pregnancy.

“This is going to be my first and only reaction to the whirlwind news that broke 24 hours ago,” wrote Cotillard.

“Many years ago I met the man of my life [actor/director Guillaume Canet], the father of my son and the baby we are expecting. He is my love, my best friend, the only one that I need.”

What with Jolie and Pitt falling for each other on the set of the 2005 spy film *Mr and Mrs Smith* while Pitt was still married to Jennifer Aniston, the rumour mill couldn’t help but confuse art and life a second time around.

Still, talk of Pitt and Cotillard’s immediate connection – professionally speaking – on meeting for rehearsals (“Their chemistry was electric,” producer Graham King told *People*) lit a spark.

“*Allied* is the story of two spies who have to pretend they are a husband and wife, and are given an almost suicidal mission to kill a German ambassador,” says Cotillard in her lilting, American-accented English.

“They fall in love for real, which doesn’t make their lives easy.”

Not easy at all: when Pitt’s character, US intelligence officer Max Vatan, is told that his wife, French resistance fighter Marianne Beausejour, may be German spy, he is given the task of executing her if it proves to be the case.

Clever and entertaining – as one might expect from the director of *Forrest Gump* – *Allied* is a slice of old-school Hollywood movie making, with the perfectly coiffed Cotillard a vision in bias-cut jade satin even when she and a tuxedoed Pitt are gunning down Nazis at a banquet. Less extreme acting, perhaps, than artful make-believe.

Asked about her much-touted connection with Pitt, Cotillard pauses, her glassy eyes alert, scanning me for a hidden agenda.

“He is a man who is easy to connect with,” she says. “His life is obviously very special but he is very connected to this world, sometimes more than people who don’t have his life.”

She flashes a smile. “He is a very good man, very generous and open. We had the chance to rehearse for 15 days before we began filming, which is unusual, and which I loved,” she continues. “It means that when you arrive on set you have this connection and trust.”

Most directors prefer to keep things fresh, she says. Then there are those with particularly idiosyncratic methods: for her Oscar-nominated role as a sacked and depressed factory worker in 2014’s *Two Days, One Night*, Belgian auteurs Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardennes got her doing 82 extended takes for one scene.

“We went into the most trivial details, going beyond the work, beyond acting,” says Cotillard, for whom authenticity and connection, her buzzword, is everything. “They pushed me there, and I was so happy to go there with them.”

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The last time she thoroughly rehearsed for a film was for *Macbeth*. Cotillard took on the famous role, opposite Michael Fassbender, after a telephone conversation with maverick Australian director Justin Kerzel, who was following up the acclaimed *Snowtown*. (She worked with both men again on the upcoming big-budget video game adaptation, *Assassin’s Creed*.)

Impressed by Kerzel’s vision (“I felt in his voice he was a true artist, and when I met him I was right”), Cotillard plunged deep into Lady Macbeth’s dark interior.

“Several times I have been surprised at how I can let go and channel something strong, something that isn’t about me,” she says.

“There’s no ego involved. I’m like a witness. Even in my life I’ve had surprising experiences that make me think we humans are amazing machines, and if we were just willing to explore the possibilities we could be so much more powerful.”

But getting inside a character is one thing. Letting that character go is another. This wasn’t a problem with love-interest parts in blockbusters such as *The Dark Knight Rises* (in which she played opposite Batman) or Woody Allen’s romantic comedy *Midnight in Paris*.

But Lady Macbeth and Piaf didn’t want to leave. Especially Piaf, whose presence haunted her throughout post-*La Vie En Rose* holidays to Tahiti and Peru until – ping! – Cotillard realised that, having been abandoned as a child, Piaf’s greatest fear was to be alone.

“Now this is like the ultimate understanding I have of a character, the getting out,” she says.

“I never know what form it will take but it takes less time because I am aware of the process and that I have to ignite it, which is pretty cool.”

A self-described “outcast” and “teenage weirdo”, Cotillard grew up in a bobo (bourgeois bohemian) household on the 18th floor of a tower block in the Parisian suburbs, the eldest of three children born to thespian parents. Her mother was a theatre actress, her father a mime artist and theatre director.

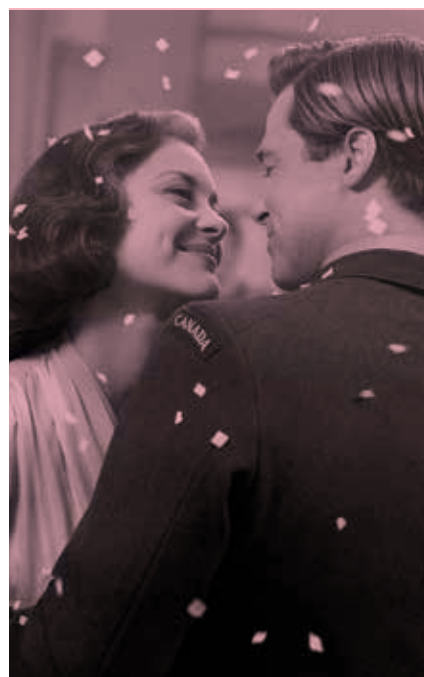
Acting started early: “I have a vivid memory of being onstage with my mum at the age of four and kneeling next to this other actress and the director saying, ‘This is your mother, she is dead.’”

A grin. “And I was so confused, telling the guy, ‘No! My mum is over there!’ I remember hiding under a piano and thinking everybody was crazy.”



Clockwise from far left: Cotillard as Edith Piaf in *La Vie En Rose*; with *Macbeth* co-star Michael Fassbender at Cannes, 2015; in a cage in Paris for a 2013 Greenpeace protest; with co-star Brad Pitt in *Allied*; with partner Guillaume Canet.

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She went on to study drama at the Conservatoire d’Art Dramatique in Orléans in the Loire Valley, 130 kilometres south of Paris, where her family had moved in the 1990s to live close to the land. By 18 she was landing small parts on French TV; her breakthrough came in 1998 with an ongoing role in Luc Besson’s action comedy franchise *Taxi*.

Aged 27, she was hankering for the sort of chunky roles found in films by American directors Francis Ford Coppola, David Lynch and Martin Scorsese, but feeling stuck.

Considering chucking in acting to work for Greenpeace and maybe pursue music – she’s a talented singer and multi-instrumentalist – she landed a part in Tim Burton’s *Big Fish* and headed to America. She went on to play the love interest in Ridley Scott’s *A Good Year*, opposite Russell Crowe.

“I haven’t met many Australians,” she says when I ask, “but the ones I have met all seem to have a kindness which I assume is a very common thing? I’m not just saying this,” she adds. “If it was the opposite I wouldn’t mention it.”

Kindness matters to Cotillard. Kindness, depth, connection. We talk about the tragic events in France of the past two years. How much has her country changed?

“Of course things feel different because fear is rising, and some politicians take advantage of this. But even if we claim that, after the Bataclan, Nice and all the attacks, we don’t live with fear, it is a struggle.”

She pauses. “I personally don’t live with fear. I’m very much connected to present times and don’t let my mental...” – she searches for a word, lets it go – “manipulate my thoughts.”

“It is so important to be connected to people who spread wisdom,” she continues, “because wisdom is the only way to fight this ignorance and fear.”

“The only thing that can bring us together and create a connection that will last will be a big positive shock, not a negative thing.”

Such as? Cotillard is silent before issuing a low whistle and turning up her palms. What she does know, however, is that attaching her celebrity status to environmental causes makes people

double take, and lets minority voices be heard. As an ambassador for Greenpeace, she has done everything from travelling to the Congo to make a series of films about the destruction of the rainforests by logging companies to, in November 2013, literally caging herself outside the Louvre in protest at the arrest two months earlier of Greenpeace activists – the “Arctic 30” – in Russia.

Censure doesn’t bother her: “Celebrities, let’s call us that, will always be criticised, especially if we mix things. But the material for any artist – painter, writer, singer, actor – is the world and its people; we bear witness and we give a testimony.”

“At one point I thought I better shut up as I thought I was being counterproductive. Then I got an email saying how happy they were because my name got them heard faster, and I thought, ‘Okay, f... the critics.’”

Everything she does, she says, from her acting to her philanthropy to the way she lives her life, is connected to her need to understand human beings, to try to figure out how we function.

“I’m much more zen than my characters but I’m still...”

Another pause.

Deep?

Cotillard flashes a smile. “*Oui*,” she says. “Deep will do.” •

### THREE FACTS: *MARION COTILLARD*

She used to be the bass player and vocalist in her singer/composer friend Yodelice’s band. Cotillard hid behind her alter ego Simone, her gran’s name: “It was good to have the spotlight on someone else.”

She’s passionate about organic food and is a committed locavore; wherever possible she likes to eat food grown within a 170-kilometre radius of her location.

An avid reader, Cotillard’s all-time favourite author is Lithuanian-born Frenchman, Romain Gary (1914-80): “His writing is so beautiful. If I lived in his era I would have done anything to meet him, which I think is what his wife [French-American actress] Jean Seberg did.”