



Patricia Clarkson

I. *"Aaahhhrrroooooo!"* In Room 603 at Manhattan's Chelsea Hotel, a woman sits on a windowsill barking and baying at the daytime moon. She's either insane or insanely bored—and within seconds, she's rolling around on a shag rug, her head lost in the cloud of black tulle that is her skirt. Suddenly, you get the panicked feeling that everything you'd thought was absolute about her—that she's private and even, as her name suggests, "patrician"—is overwhelmingly uncertain. The only thing you know for sure is that she is not as she seems.

II. *[The day before]* Past the knobby old men playing chess, the power nappers, the panhandlers, the joggers, and the dreadlocked dealers, Patricia Clarkson finds the perfect spot for a picnic. Tucked away in a corner of Washington Square Park, it offers sun-dappled shade and plenty of dirt for her pitbull mix, Beaux, to roll around in. While he's making a spectacle of himself, she slips easily into anonymity. It's a state she knows well after nearly two decades of toiling in the world of independent film, where she has played eccentrics, an addict, wives, and moms, but rarely the leading lady.

Today, she's in character as the Picnicking New Yorker, wearing sunglasses and a floppy white Yankees hat to block out the sun. "I'm really, like, 19th century," she says, unpacking plastic forks and a stained tablecloth she's brought from her home nearby. "If I weren't too embarrassed, I'd carry a parasol." Like New Orleans, where she was born and raised, Clarkson, 44, is a potent mix of southern gentility and downright debauchery. One moment she's offering neatly packaged pleasant-ries; the next, she is floating down some unseemly stream of consciousness, as in, "Great writing really gets me going. It infuses me, it enters me. Ha-ha."

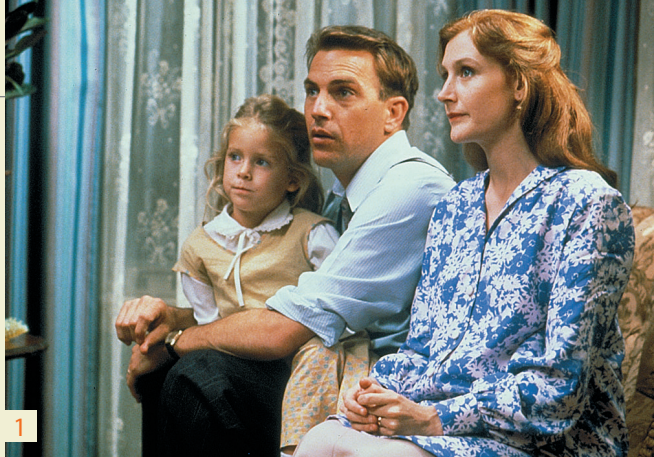
Catching people off guard is one of her talents, yet no one at last year's Sundance Film Festival was ruffled when the unofficial title of Indie Queen (previously reserved for the likes of Lili Taylor and Parker Posey) went to Clarkson. Nor were they surprised when she took home a special jury prize for her performances in three films. As a loose-limbed clown in *All the Real Girls*, she showed audiences who she might have been as a graduate student at the Yale School of Drama, where, she says, "I did wild, crazy stuff—crazy, crazy," and leaves it at that. Likewise, as a world-weary artist in *The Station Agent*, she hinted at who she might be now, should you meet her in person. (Of course, you would be wrong. That's the trouble with good actors.) But it was her role as a caustic, cancer-stricken mother in *Pieces of April* that finally earned Clarkson a long-deserved Oscar nomination, and once again confused fans who thought they knew her.

"The beauty of Patti is that you're going to have a hard time defining her," warns Peter Sarsgaard, who stars with Clarkson in the upcoming drama *The Dying Gaul*. "I mean, look at all the different types of people she's played. It's not that they all aren't

This southern belle has a voice like a dirty martini and, in movies from *High Art* to *Pieces of April*, an uncanny knack for combining fragility and fierceness.

BY BROOKE HAUSER
Photograph by Brian Finke





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3



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- 1987 THE UNTOUCHABLES 1
- 1988 THE DEAD POOL
- 1988 ROCKET GIBRALTAR
- 1988 EVERYBODY'S ALL-AMERICAN
- 1990 TUNE IN TOMORROW
- 1995 JUMANJI
- 1995 PHARAOH'S ARMY
- 1998 HIGH ART 2
- 1998 PLAYING BY HEART
- 1999 SIMPLY IRRESISTIBLE
- 1999 WAYWARD SON
- 1999 THE GREEN MILE
- 2000 JOE GOULD'S SECRET
- 2000 FALLING LIKE THIS
- 2001 THE PLEDGE
- 2001 WENDIGO
- 2002 HEARTBREAK HOSPITAL
- 2002 WELCOME TO COLLINWOOD
- 2002 FAR FROM HEAVEN 3
- 2003 ALL THE REAL GIRLS
- 2003 THE SAFETY OF OBJECTS
- 2003 THE STATION AGENT
- 2003 PIECES OF APRIL 4
- 2004 MIRACLE 5
- 2004 DOGVILLE



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Patti, but she has access to all different sides of herself.”

In 2005, she'll explore her dark side as the headmistress of a boarding school in *The Woods*, which she calls “an old-fashioned horror movie—it's not going to be a lot of girls in panties.” Then, in *The Dying Gaul*, we'll see her naughty side as a “very Hollywood lady” who gets entangled in an online love triangle with a young writer (Sarsgaard) who is courting her husband (Clarkson's ex-boyfriend Campbell Scott, with whom she's still close friends). “I think she loved the fact that Campbell and I had to make out,” says Sarsgaard. Whenever they did, “she'd do that chomping thing, like, ‘Nya-nya-nya-nya-nya.’ She's like a little animal sometimes. I mean, half of what she says isn't really verbal, you know?”

He's hit on something here. A human recorder of subhuman behavior, Clarkson tends to express herself through gestures, glances, and syllables loaded with feeling (*ach* and *oy* are favorites). Here's Clarkson describing her approach to acting: “I'm not a rehearser. I just like to be. The less you say to me, the less you poke and prod me, ‘Pmm-pmm-pmm . . .’” She jabs the air with her finger, squinting one eye. She never does finish the sentence.

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III. For years, Hollywood casting directors didn't know what to do with the pretty blond Zelig with a voice like a dirty martini. “Ask my mother,” Clarkson says, “I've had this voice since I was five. It's like, *oy*.” The daughter of retired health administrator Arthur and New Orleans councilwoman Jackie (both loved and reviled for her efforts to

clean up the French Quarter, Jackie Clarkson has been referred to as “Führer Clarkson”), she inherited her mother's outspokenness early on. When she was 12, and had only a Christmas play on her résumé, Clarkson starred in a junior high production of *F.L.I.P.P.E.D.* “Feminist Liberation Idealist Party for Permanent Equality and Democracy,” she recites, without missing a beat. In high school she joined the Chargerettes. “Like the Rockettes, we were high-kick and came out at halftime,” she says. Then surfing yet another wave of free association, she breaks out into a familiar jingle: “Whoooo wears short shorts?”

Clarkson studied theater as an undergraduate at New York's Fordham University, but she really stole the show at Yale, where she played everything from a man (“I was a little French admiral in Sondheim's musical *Pacific Overtures*”) to a tap-dancing eight-year-old murderer. “The head of the acting program there always cast you against type—he'd stretch you,” she says. “It was a thousand characters I got to play, and I loved it all.”

Although she nabbed her fair share of leading lady roles within the ivory tower, Hollywood was another story. “I was never an ingenue, and that's the thing,” she says. “I needed to mature, my face and my voice needed to catch up with each other.” She made her film debut as Eliot Ness's wife in 1987's *The Untouchables*, but her big break didn't come until much later, when she starred with Ally Sheedy in Lisa Cholodenko's 1998 indie drama *High Art*.

Even Clarkson doesn't know how she transformed into a German lesbian heroin addict named Greta (a part Cholodenko originally offered to Sonic Youth rocker Kim Gordon, who didn't want to play a junkie). “I thought, ‘I'm going to walk in like the suburban mom, and no one's going to believe me.’ But something about the character I identified with quite strongly—the hard exterior, the fragility, I don't know,” she says. “People called it pre-Greta and Greta. I'd come in like, ‘Hi! Hahahahaha!’ And then suddenly I'd go into this funk. I went with some instincts I had, and I didn't question it.”

Overnight, she went from being impossible to cast to impossible to typecast. “Things shifted for me in a big way,” she says, laugh lines fanning out from her light blue eyes. “I mean, not in a Julia Roberts, Nicole Kidman way, but in a my-world way.” A slew of small but memorable roles followed in high-profile projects such as *The Green Mile* and *The Pledge*. Then, in 2002, she got some Oscar buzz for her performance in Todd Haynes's Technicolor weepie *Far From Heaven*. Though the whippet-thin actress wasn't the obvious choice to play Eleanor, a '50s homemaker-turned-bully, star Julianne Moore lobbied Haynes passionately on Clarkson's behalf. “Patti was someone he'd thought of very early on, but then he had the idea that Eleanor should be bigger than me,” says Moore, a fellow theater maven and longtime friend. “And he'd say, ‘How about so-and-so?’ And I'd say, ‘Well, how about Patti?’ And he'd go, ‘How about so-and-so?’ And I'd say, ‘How about Patti?’ And he'd say, ‘How—’ ‘WHAT ABOUT PATTI?!’ He finally came back and said, ‘Okay! We offered it to Patti.’”

These days, she's getting meaty parts in art-house and studio films alike. In the past year, Clarkson went from playing an ice queen in Lars von Trier's *Dogville* to playing the wife of Olympic ice hockey coach Herb Brooks, in Disney's *Miracle*. Not only did *Miracle* (Continued on page 123)

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director Gavin O'Connor have the part rewritten to satisfy Clarkson (who, he recalls, read the original draft and said, "There's nothing to do, there's nothing to play"), but she shifted the dynamic on set. "It was such a testosterone-driven movie, and I just loved the estrogen, the radiating alpha-waves of Patti," he says. More than a few of the guys had crushes. "I think they even talked about it, like, 'You think I got a shot at Patti Clarkson? You think she'd be attracted to me?'"

No doubt, she knows how to make men blush. This past spring, at Washington's Kennedy Center, she portrayed the ultimate tease: Blanche DuBois, the unglued heroine who drives Stanley Kowalski crazy (and vice versa) in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Clearly, she's relieved to be herself again after surviving an experience she calls "overwhelming, inundating, debilitating." She smiles bittersweetly, as if talking about an old friend. "All of my roles have been demanding, but Blanche is . . . Blanche." Says *Pieces of April* writer-director Peter Hedges, "Everything in Patti's career has been leading to her playing Blanche DuBois. I was happy to be a stop along the way."

But it doesn't end there. How could it? "I have to tell you, I have a stack, a *stack* of scripts," she says, holding down an invisible paper mountain. "But there are certain things I can't do right now. I can't play another ill woman. I can't do moms. Look, when you reach a certain age, you're often a mother or a wife or both. I'm neither, but I seem to be playing them!"

Sometimes, the offer is too good to refuse, as was the case with the upcoming drama *Conquistadora*. Written by actor Chris Cooper's wife, Marianne Leone, it tells the real-life story of a woman who gave birth to twins with cerebral palsy. "She took on the board of education, she took on the government, she took on everyone—she's amazing," says Clarkson.

And just in case it wasn't already clear, and without the false humility of a megawatt movie star, and because, frankly, she knows that she deserves to be where she has arrived after almost 20 dues-paying years, she says proudly (and loudly), "I'm the lead of the film."

IV. *"How d'you like my fuck-me dress and my fuck-me shoes?" Clarkson asks, hand on hip, this time modeling a slinky Diane von Furstenberg wrap. Even among strangers at this photo shoot, she is good at playing the host. A one-woman carnival of risqué, eccentric entertainment, she's captivating to watch—but perhaps better observed in the spaces between. Like now. Her back straight as a pin, hands folded delicately in her lap, she stares ahead, lost in a momentary silence. Finally, you think you've seen her—but look again, and she's gone.*